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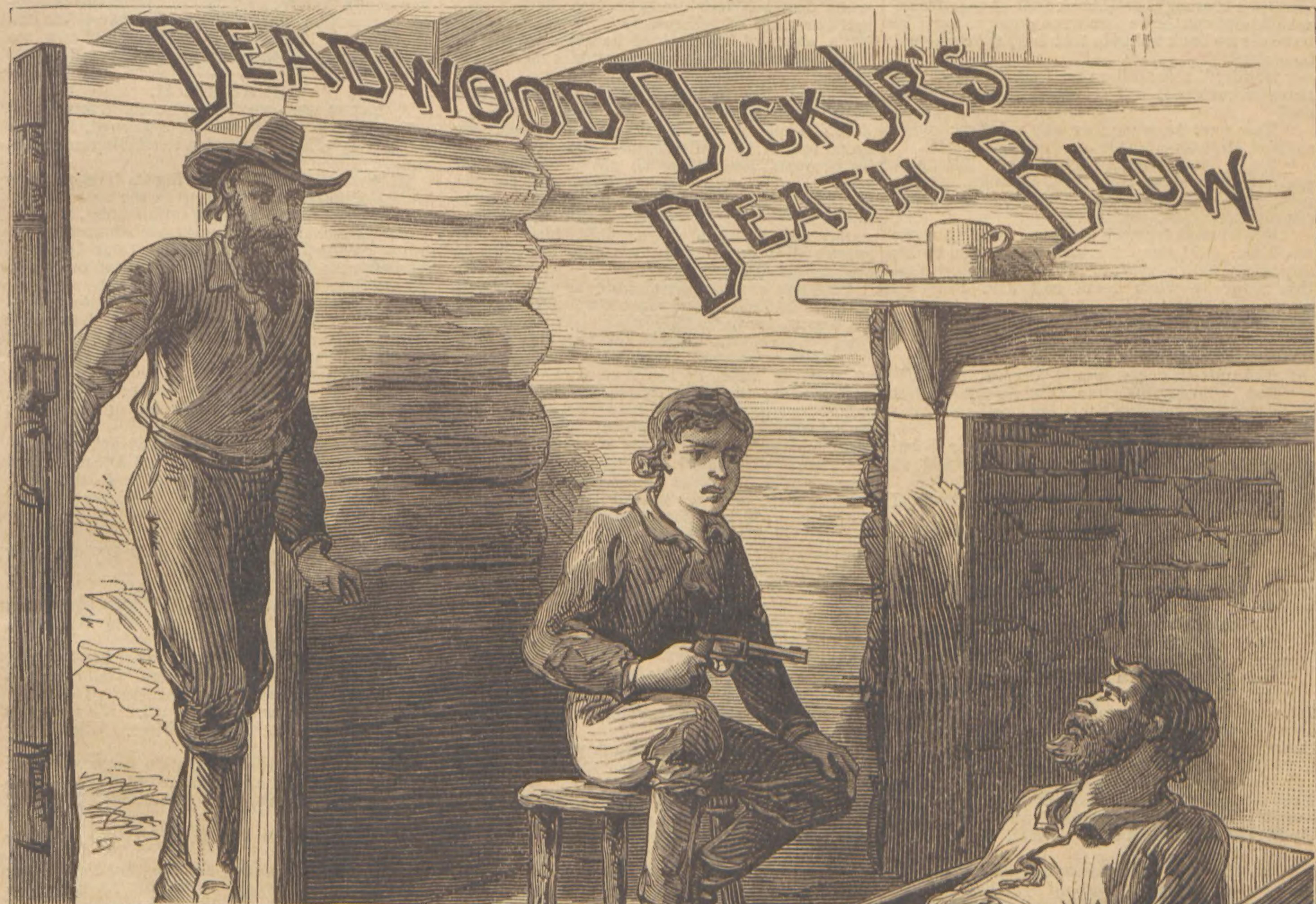
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OR,

The Little Circus at Last Chance.

BY ED. L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

JIM FIDDLER'S GROUND.

"WHOAP! Hol' right up thar, strangers, or I'm a ring-tailed chimpanzeezer ef I don't plump a pleb'ian pill plumb through yer think-works! Hands up, too, ef yer don't want yer harp ter be hung on ther willers!"

Needless to say, the two travelers paused.

Mounted upon a pair of common mules, and clad in rough attire, with red shirts, jean trowsers and slouch hat, a glance indicated their character or calling:—they were miners, or perhaps prospectors just now.

DICK SMILED UNDER HIS FLAMING WHISKERS, AT THE SITUATION, WITH KATE ON GUARD.

The foremost was of uncertain age, with hair and beard of the reddest. The other, close behind, was a young man, or youth, of slight build.

It was night, but not dark, for the moon was looking down out of a clear sky, trying to rival the daylight with its brightness, and everything out of the shadows was plainly seen.

The two travelers had just turned a bend in a tortuous coulee through which the trail lay, when they were thus brought to a halt.

Just ahead of them, astride of a boulder, sat a man with a rifle pressed to his shoulder, his finger on the trigger and the "business-end" of the gun commanding the trail.

"Waal, uncle, what's ther matter hyar?" the foremost of the two mule-riders coolly questioned.

He had raised his hands as requested, but did not seem frightened.

"I takes et yer is strangers hyar," the rough customer on the boulder conjectured.

"Then yer takes et about right," was the response, "fer that's what we be. Is this ther trail ter Last Chance?"

"Et ar' one of 'em."

"Then there's more'n one?"

"Yas; an' yer has tooken ther wrong one."

"Yer talks in riddles, uncle."

"Then I'll have fer make et plainer to yer. Yer took ther right trail back thar at ther forks, which happens ter be ther wrong one; so yer will have ter go back an' take ther left, an' then ye'll be right."

"But don't this trail go ter Last Chance?" the traveler parleyed. "I understood ye ter say et do."

"Yas; so et do, when ther way ar' open; which same et ain't ter-night."

"Waal, waal; that's sort o' bad. Et ar' a good ways back to ther fork, old man, an' my pard hyar ar' gettin' tired. What's ther reason fer ther blockade, anyhow?"

"Don't fergit ter keep yer hands well up while we talks. As I remarked aforetimes, you two is strangers hyarabouts, or ye would know that this hyar is what folks call Jim Fiddler's ground."

"Jim Fiddler's ground?"

"Jest so."

"Never heerd tell on't, uncle."

"So I opined, or yer would 'a' gone around."

"But, who is this hyar Fiddler? An' what 'bjections kin he have ter folks usin' this hyar trail?"

"Hands well up, ef yer please. Never heerd o' Jim Fiddler, hey? Yer must ha' come a good ways, strangers."

"Yas; we has come a right smart ways, I allow."

"Keep 'em up. This hyar Jim Fiddler, yer see, owns ther ground hyarabouts by right o' claim an' settlement, an' he means ter do as he pleases with his own. That's ther long an' short on't."

"But he can't own ther trail."

"Et 'mounts to ther same thing."

"An' how is that?"

"He's got persession an' holds et."

"Ar' yet I don't see what harm et kin do ter let peaceable pilgrims pass this way. I don't like ther idea of turnin' cl'ar back thar to ther forks."

"Can't help what ye likes, them is orders."

"But, why is et so? I'm a galoot what allus likes ter know ther p'tic'lars of a thing. Why won't this hyar Jim Fiddler 'low us ter pass? Seems ter me et ain't a square deal."

"What yer mean?"

"Why, you'd orter be posted down thar at ther forks, instead o' way up hyar half a dozen miles away, an' that would save pilgrims ther trouble o' goin' back. Not that I'd kick so hard ef et wasn't fer my pard; he ain't strong."

He don't look very biggish."

"An' he ain't. He's a younger brother o' mine, ther babbie of ther family, an' as all ther rest is dead but us two, I've had him for a pard ever since he was a little kid. But, yer hasn't answered my question. Why won't Jim Fiddler 'low us ter go on?"

"Ye said yer never heerd o' him, I b'lieve?"

"Never till you mentioned his handle."

"Hands a leetle higher, ef yer please. Waal, I'll tell yer all about et, an' then yer kin see fer yerself how et ar'."

"All right, uncle, let us have ther story while we wait."

"Et ar' soon told, an' hyar et ar'. Don't let me have ter remind ye about yer hands, meanstwhile. Yer see, this hyar Jim Fiddler an' a pard staked a big claim hyar a good while ago, an' worked a mine on ther quiet. They had a reg'lar bonanzar, I'm tellin' ye."

"Waal, they stored up a big pile of ther yal-

ler, and then takin' about all they could carry with 'em, they buried the rest and went off to buy critters ter pack ther rest of et away with; but bad luck got after 'em about that time.

"Fiddler's pard turned up his toes an' died afore they got to ther settlements, an' Fiddler himself wasn't no hand at scoutin', an' he got lost. When he did git to a camp he was about dead, an' was tooken down with a fever an' never got out ergain. Sich is life.

"Waal, et so happened that at thatar' camp was Fiddler's son, who had set out ter find his dad. He knowed him at sight, an' proceeded ter take keer of him best he could. His name was Jim, too, named fer ther old man. He was 'junior,' then, but now he ain't; an' he's ther Jim what is holdin' down this hyar claim.

"Ther 'riginal Jim had lugged some of his gold to ther camp, an' everybody was jest wild ter find out whar he'd digged et. I reckon ef he had told 'em, that camp would 'a' moved out in less'n ten minutes, an' he would been left thar all alone wi' his son; but, he couldn't tell, then, an' they never found out, fer after some days he died.

"He was buried in proper style, an' then ther boys jest lit onto ther young Jim ter know ef he had got ther secret out of his dad. Jim said he hadn't, but they didn't believe that, an' when Jim left ther camp he was dogged by a score or more of fellers what meant ter come in fer a share of his find ef he ever did find et. They believed his dad had given him ther secret, ye see.

"Waal, Jim he struck off ter what is now called Last Chance, which was then a camp of a dozen souls or so, an' thar he stopped. He went out in ther hills scoutin' about every day, an' et wasn't long afore he got onto ther fack that a good many was follerin' him around, tryin' ter keep him in sight. As soon as he tumbled to that, he jest sots down at ther camp an' thar he stays. But, bless ye, he wasn't idle; oh, no! An' what do yer think he was up to? I'll tell yer.

"He was stakin' ther claim over ergain, from maps he had made, and afore it was guessed what he was up ter he had filed ther claim an' thar he was. After that he jest got together a band of us fellers, agreein' ter give us a sartain share in ther find when he found et, an' he is huntin' fer et every time ther moon sails full, an' we holds the trails clear so's that noboby kin drop in an' spy on him. An' thar ye hev et, stranger; hide, ha'r an' all."

"Huh!" ejaculated the traveler, when the story ended, "ef that is all thar is to et, he needn't be 'fraid o' me an' my pard. We simply wants ter git ter Last Chance as soon as we kin, an' that's all. We don't keer nothin' about his bid gold."

"Mebbe yer is talkin' straight," answered the guardian of the trail, "but et ain't fer me ter break orders, ye know."

"Then yer really means ter make us go cl'ar 'round an' back by another trail? Et ar' rough, stranger."

"S'pose et ar', on the leetle cuss, but et can't be helped, onless—"

"Unless what?" the traveler caught up quickly.

"I was goin' ter say, onless yer camp right hyar till mornin', an' then ther way will be clear ergain."

"Couldn't think on't, onless we had to do et," was the response to that proposal. "My brother pard would git sick an' die, sure."

"Waal, thar can't be nothin' else done. Yer will have ter turn about an' face the way ye kem. I'm goin' ter tell Fiddler ter put up a notice at ther forks, so's he what reads kin run—or however way et goes."

"A good idea; I only wish you had thought of it afore we kem erlong that way. But, say, I have somethin' ter p'pose to ye."

"Waal, what ar' et?"

"It's a long ways back ter the forks."

"No gittin' around that ar' fack."

"An' I'd do 'most anything ter save goin' back."

"I don't doubt et, stranger."

"We is willin' ter trust you half way ef you will trust us ther other half, an' so come ter a dicker."

"What yer mean now?"

"Waal, we'll let yer blindfold us ef you will promise ter take us through to the other side o' this Jim Fiddler's claim."

"Haw! haw! haw!"

"Ob, but I mean et."

"Do yer, really?"

"Yes."

"Yer don't know but we'd lead ye off an' rob ye, or maybe kill ye."

"Et ar' my turn ter laugh now. What ye would git by robbin' us wouldn't be enough ter pay yer back board; an' as fer killin' us, yer wouldn't have no call ter do that."

"I opine yer is right, by ther looks of ye."

"Then what do you yer say to et?"

"I can't leave my post."

"But can't you call some one else that can guide us?"

"No; but I'll tell ye what yer kin do."

"An' what ar' that?"

"Et ar' 'most time fer ther captin' of ther guard ter be round."

"Waal?"

"Ef yer wants ter wait till he comes, yer kin see what he has ter say to yer idee. Mebby he'll pass ver through."

"We'll do et. But, fer ther love o' goodness let us put our hands down now, fer we won't be able ter use 'em in a week if we holds 'em up any longer."

"Yer kin put 'em down, fer I takes ye ter be peaceable cusses; but at ther fu'st sign o' yer reachin' fer a gun I'll do jest what I said I would; I'll puke ther pleb'ian plumbago at ye in a way that will make ye sick an' dizzy, you bet."

"Oh, yer won't have no trouble wi' us, that I promise ye," declared the traveler. "Put down yer hands, Willie, me boy!" turning to his slender companion, "an' be keerful ter keep 'em out in sight all ther time. That's it; an' now we will rest easy till ther captin' gits hyar."

CHAPTER II.

TELLS WHO THE TRAVELERS WERE.

THAT little understanding arranged, the man on the boulder assumed a less belligerent attitude.

He lowered his rifle, allowing its butt to drop to the ground and leaning on the muzzle with folded arms, rested his chin on his arms.

The travelers having adjusted themselves to more comfortable positions on their beasts of burden, rode forward to within a pace or two of the boulder on which the man sat.

"This ar' a heap more comfortable than a-settin' wi' stiff back an' holdin' up yer paws as if invitin' ther moon ter come down," the elder of the travelers remarked, in his cool and easy-going manner.

"Yas; I opine et ar'," was the response. "What mought yer handle be, ef yer don't mind tellin'?"

"Don't mind tellin' a body that ar'," was the prompt answer. "My name ar' Adam Tablet, an' my brother's name ar' Willyum, though I allus calls him Willie, a way I got inter when he was a kid."

"You is miners, I takes et."

"I am, but not Willie. He's too frail fer that."

"Then what do he do?"

"Tends to ther cookin', an' sech like, when we is in camp. I don't 'low him ter work hard."

"You is a good specimen of ther big brother, I should say. Not many of 'em would keer a snap what becomed of their brothers, I opine."

"Et runs in ther family, pard. We allus was affectionate ter one 'nother, ye see. What's yer own name?"

"My name? Waal, et ain't no secret as I knows on, an' as I ain't 'shamed of et yer is welcome to know what et ar'. Dominick Draper ar' my handle."

"That's a name not likely ter be a counterfeited, I should say."

"Et ar' a good name, an' one that I'm ruther proud of, I tell yer, Goin' ter Last Chance lookin' fer work?"

"You hev hit et, pard. We has been doin' some prospectin', but funds hev got so 'tarnel low that I have got ter go back to ther sweat of me brow ergain. Reckon I hear yer captin' comin' now."

The guardian of the way pricked up his ears and listened.

"Darn me ef I hear anything," he said.

"Then your ears ain't as sharp as mine," declared Mr. Tablet. "Somebody is comin', that's sure."

"Your ears must be sharper'n needles, an' that's ther fack. I can't hear a thing yet."

They listened again, and now Mr. Draper was able to catch the sound of steps coming toward his post from the rear way.

"I hears 'em now," he said. "Yes; I opine et ar' ther captin' comin', an' I'll bring my old gun up to ther front ergain ef yer don't keer."

With his words he brought the rifle up and covered the travelers with it, but did not put it to his shoulder.

The steps became rapidly more audible, and

in a few moments a man came in sight around a bend.

Like Mr. Draper, he was a rough-looking customer, and was similarly armed.

"Hillo!" he exclaimed, at sight of the travelers.

"Hyan's a brace of 'em, captin," the guard informed.

"So I see. What is ye waitin' for, pilgrims?"

"Waitin' fer you," answered Mr. Tablet.

"Fer me?" in surprise.

"Prezack. Yer man hyar said yer would soon be erlong, an' we thort we'd jest hold on an' see ye."

"Waal, what do ye want?"

"Yer man won't low us ter go no furder this way."

"That's right; that's what he is here for."

"An' he said we'd have ter tail to an' go back to ther forks an' take another trail ter git to Last Chance."

"That's about ther size of et, stranger."

"An' that's ther p'int. Yer see, my brother hyar, not over strong, is about tuckered out, an' we want ter git to ther camp as soon as we kin. I p'posed to yer man hyar that you blindfold us an' conduct us through this hyar forbidden ground."

"Ther deuce yer did."

"Yas; yer see et ar' like this: We is willin' ter trust you if you is willin' ter trust us, an' you would have et all yer own way anyhow. I hope yer will do et, pard, fer really we don't want ter go back all that ways to ther forks ergain."

The captain of the guard rubbed his chin.

"What do yer think about this, Dominick?" he asked of his man.

"Ef it was me, I wouldn't 'bjet to et," was the reply. "They is peaceable enough; held up their hands like good boys when I invited 'em ter do et, an' hev been good as pie ever sence."

"Ef yer had only had yer man posted down at ther forks," said the traveler of the red hair, "et would 'a' been all right; we wouldn't been put out so much. But, ter let us come on fer half a dozen miles er more, and then turn us around, that's a leetle rough."

"Then yer is willin' ter be blindfolded?"

"Yas; ef yer will give us yer word as a white man that yer won't play us no scrub tricks."

"And will you allow us ter disarm ye?"

"Wull, now, yer couldn't expect sane men ter agree ter that."

"Then we reckons et ar' no go. Yer might pop us over, an' try ter find out ther secret."

"We don't keer nothin' about Fiddler's secret," Mr. Tablet declared. "All we is after is ter git ter Last Chance without goin' back to ther forks."

"Waal, let us take yer weepins an' we'll do what yer wants us to. I'll lead ye through to t'other side."

"Yer means us fair, an' no tricks about et?"

"Yas; a square deal, straight."

"An' what ther captin tells yer, yer kin 'pend on," vouched the guardsmen.

"Waal, we'll do et," the traveler finally agreed. "Yer won't have no call ter kill us, an' robbin' us wouldn't pay fer ther salt ye eat, fer we is nigh about strapped."

"Yer kin trust me."

"All right. Hand me yer gun an' knife, Willie, lad, an' I'll pass 'em over to ther gent. Then I'll blind yer eyes till yer will think yer is in ther shades o' Egypt."

The younger traveler immediately handed over his weapons, the elder passing them on to the captain of the guard; after which his eyes were securely blindfolded by the folds of a great red handkerchief.

"Thar," remarked Adam, "yer kin examine that bit o' work ef yer wants to, captin, but yer will find et all right. Now, hyar's my own weepin's, an' yer kin tie my eyes up in like manner jest as soon as ye please; an' ther sooner ther better."

He handed over a brace of revolvers and a knife as he spoke, and leaned over to receive the bandage.

The weapons were taken, thrust carelessly into the man's belt, and when a suitable bandage had been found, Mr. Tablet was properly blindfolded.

"There, I guess yer will do," the man decided.

"I reckon I will, fur as seein' is concerned," Adam laughed.

"An' is et ther same wi' you, younker?" the captain demanded.

"Yes, sir; I can't see anything at all," was the answer.

It was the first time the younger man had spoken, and his voice was in keeping with his appearance—not strong yet masculine enough in tone, and was not unlike that of the usual youth just leaving boyhood behind him.

"Now we'll be off," answered the captain. "This is a favor I'm doin' fer ye, strangers, an' I hope ye will 'preciate et. Don't try on no tricks wi' me, ef yer has any regard fer yer comfort."

"Don't know what tricks we could play, blindfolded an' disarmed," laughingly responded Adam. "We're in your power now, an' will have ter go whar you is a mind ter lead us."

"An et was yer willin'ness ter be disarmed that won ye ther favor. Ef yer had kicked, back yer would 'a' had ter gone."

"Oh, we is goin' ter trust ye, seein' that that's no reason why ye should try ter fool us."

"Then we'll be off. Dominick, keep yer eyes open an' let nobody pass."

"You bet, captin," was the response. With that the man laid hold upon the bridle of Mr. Tablet's mule and started forward, the other mule following readily enough.

Some conversation was carried on as they proceeded, but nothing of importance to the story in hand, and nothing happened by the way so far as could be known then.

Once the party passed a place where voices were heard, and where some one exchanged a jest with the guide, but that was all and it told nothing of what was going on, and at last the guide came to a stop.

"Waal, hyar we ar'," he said.

"Be we out o' Jim Fiddler's domain?" asked the elder brother.

"Yas; yer is clear through now, an' kin go on whar ye please. Hold down an' I'll take off yer blinders."

Mr. Tablet leaned over and the bandage was quickly removed from his eyes, and his weapons were given back into his hands.

"Much 'bliged to ye fer ther trouble we has put ye to," he said. "Yer has done us a big favor, an' any time we kin return et, let us know. Hold hyar, Willie, an' I'll take off that handkercher."

It was quickly done, and the younger brother's weapons were given back to him in like manner.

"It wasn't much out of me way," responded the captain of the guard, "seein' that I had to come hyer to see ther man on post anyhow, so yer is welcome to ther favor yer has got. Et ain't likely ter happen ergain, hows'ever."

"No; I s'pose not, fer we'll be wise enough ter go around next time. This hyar is ther trail ter Last Chance, I opine."

"Yas; keep right ahead till ye comes to a fork, and thar ye take ther right-hand trail an' yer will soon be thar."

"All right; an' good-night to ye, captin!"

"Good-night, pilgrims!"

And so they parted, the travelers going on their way at their same slow pace, while the captain of the guard retraced his steps.

"Well, Kate," spoke the elder brother, in low tone, presently, as they rode side by side, "we have passed through this mysterious Jim Fiddler's ground. What is the result?"

"Something to be proud of, Dick," was the cheery response. "My little Kodak has done its work, and we have half a dozen pictures that will help you greatly in the work you have undertaken. I could see well enough, the way you fixed me."

Ha! then these mule-drivers were other than they seemed! Even so. They were none other than the redoubtable Richard of Deadwood, and his ever ready little wife, Kodak Kate.

CHAPTER III.

TECUMSEH THE HAUNTED.

LAST CHANCE was a camp not essentially different from the hundreds of its kind throughout the West.

It had its principal mine, the only apology it had to offer for existing at all; and its hotel, leading saloon and quota of cabins and shanties.

The mine was called the "Peck o' Dirt," the hotel bore the dignified name of "Palace Royal," while the one leading saloon rejoiced in the unique appellation—"Never-Get-Left."

The evening hour was quite far advanced when Adam Tablet and his slender and youthful brother rode into the camp.

Al Johnson, familiarly known as "Tecumseh," had just rolled out of the Never-Get-Left, where he seldom did get left when anything was offered in the way of bottled exhilaration; and was rolling along toward his shanty singing at the top of his voice.

"A frog!—he would!—a wo-oo-ing gol!" he bel- lowed:
"Whether!—his mother!—would let 'im!—or no!
Sing iddley!—diddley!—diddley-doo!—de-doo!
—de-doo!"

Tecumseh, by the way, was a great singer, but that was the only song he knew, and that was all he knew of it. He would repeat it over and over again for an hour at a stretch, sometimes, unless somebody choked him off. And he was repeating it for something like the twentieth time now, when he was suddenly interrupted.

He was taking the middle of the street toward his domicile, that being best suited to his present unsteady condition, and had covered perhaps two-thirds of the distance from the Never-Get-Left to his shanty, when, chancing to look up, he discovered that he was about running over a couple of mules and their riders. He stopped short, just in time to escape the collision.

"Hillo!" he hiccupped; "hillo! hillo! Why don't yer take up ther hull road an' be done with et?"

"Jest what I was goin' ter ax you," the foremost of the riders responded. "You seem ter be jolly ter-night, pardner. Must feel good, don't ye?"

"Never felt better in me life," Tecumseh responded to that.

"That's good. Allers like ter see me feller critters happy. We won't detain ye, an' we'll stand still while ye git past."

"All right, boss; that's ther safest thing ter do. I kem mighty near ter runnin' inter ye, an' no mistake 'bout that. Wouldn't want ter do nothin' o' that kind, y' know."

"Of course not."

"Waal, g'-night, pard."

"Good-night."

Tecumseh had worked his way around the mules by this time, and after saying his good-night, rolled on his way again, resuming his singing;

"A frog!—he would!—and the rest of it."

The new-comers went on their way toward the lighted part of the camp, that showing them where the hotel and saloons were, and ere long drew up at the hotel in all good style.

Meanwhile Tecumseh had reached his shanty, where an adventure awaited him that was destined to sober him up.

He had kept right on singing, verse after verse of his favorite song, and every verse the same thing over again, and as he approached his door he was just winding up the last.

Suddenly he stopped short, right between points as it were, and stared at the door of his shanty in an interesting way.

This shanty was on the south side of the one street of the camp, and the moonlight falling aslant over it left a broad shadow all along the front.

There in that shadow, and leaning idly against the door of the shanty, was what Tecumseh at first took to be the form of a man. It was a dark object, and in his condition the mistake was excusable.

"Hillo!" he hiccupped, "what doin' hyar?"
There was no response.

"What y' doin' hyar, I say?" Tecumseh demanded yet again.

Still there was no response, and the dark figure did not deign to make even a move.

"Reckon I'll have ter boost ye outen that," remarked Mr. Johnson, boldly, but with a trembling hesitation that showed he was slightly awed.

He craned his neck forward to take a closer look.

It hadn't so much the appearance of a man as it had had at first.

He took a step nearer, placing one foot upon the loose and tricky stoop before his door.

As he did so, the object, whatever it was, suddenly reared up from its slightly reclining attitude, and sprung at him.

With a wild whoop Tecumseh sprung back, but his heels caught as he did so and down on his back he went, and down came that dread something right upon him.

The frightened camp bummer made all haste to scramble out from under it, and it struck the ground with a hollow sound and lay still in the white moonlight beyond the shadow of the shanty.

Tecumseh had let several more yells out of him, but now as he sat up and took a look at the thing, he was for a second or so quiet. The next second, however, he let out a yell louder than ever, sprung to his feet, and was off like the wind.

That mysterious something had proved to be a coffin!

Tecumseh never stopped until, hatless and breathless, he bounded into the Never-Get-Left.

In the mean time again, to keep events in order, the new-comers had applied for accommodations at the hotel, and had been informed that the place was full.

They had not dismounted, but had talked with the proprietor from their saddles, and he had just directed them to the Never-Get-Left across the way, when Tecumseh came tearing down the road at full speed.

"Something wrong with Peerscumsh," remarked the landlord of the hotel.

"Yas; ther gent do seem ter be in somethin' of a hurry," remarked the elder of the travelers.

They were turning their mules away as he spoke, and headed for the saloon as Tecumseh dashed past them and flung the door open wide.

The open door seemed an invitation not to be resisted, for the foremost of the strangers advanced and rode his mule right into the saloon, his slender pard following.

"So, the inmates of the place had barely recognized the frightened face of the panting Tecumseh, when the mules' hoofs thundered on the floor, and the natural inference drawn was that these strangers were responsible for his fright.

Snooks Snickerson, the proprietor of the saloon, held up his hands in horror at this unseemly invasion.

"Hol' on!" he cried, waving his arms, "hol' on! This hyar ain't no stable, strangers! Yer mustn't bring yer animiles in hyer!"

Tecumseh, at the sound of the heavy tread behind him, had turned to learn what it was before he had had time to make known anything of the discovery he had made.

As he saw the mules and their riders, he recognized them as the ones he had met only a few minutes before, and suddenly a forgotten bit of superstition flashed into his mind and he gave a yell.

"Keep 'em off!" he screamed, "keep 'em off!"

This wild cry caused the new-comers to look at him, and they recogniz'd him as the overjoyful individual they had come so near to running over.

Without paying any attention to the protest of the proprietor of the saloon against the presence of their animals, the elder of the strangers addressed himself to Tecumseh.

"Why, hillo!" he exclaimed. "Et ar' you, ain't et. What ye doin' hyar so soon? We met ye zigzagging up ther road not a minute ago."

"Yas; an' et was you what done et, too," Tecumseh asserted in his frightened way. "Et was you what done et. Bad luck ez ever was ter meet mules by moonlight, an' I'd orter knowned et."

"What has they done to ye, Peerscumsh?" asked one man.

"That is what I would like to know, too," remarked the new-comer of the red hair and beard. "What is it you accuse us of, pardner?"

"Yer has 'witched me, that's what," Tecumseh cried.

"Bewitched yer!"

"Yas; that's what yer has!"

"In what way?"

The strangers were as much interested as anybody else.

"Why, yer made me see things, that's what yer has done! Yer has got me full o' ha'nts."

"Snakes in ther boots," suggested one man in the crowd.

"Et looks like et, an' that's ther fact," declared the spokesman of the new-comers.

"But I tell yer et ain't!" protested Tecumseh. "Et ar' ha'nts, that's what et ar', an' nothin' else. Reckon' I'd orter know!"

This was argument that those who knew him best had to admit, for Tecumseh had had "snakes in the boots" more than once to their knowledge, and certainly ought to be a judge of that.

"What manner o' spook is et ye hev seen?" asked the mounted stranger.

Tecumseh was recovering his wind a little now, and seemed relieved to see that the men on the mules were flesh and blood.

"Et war a coffing, that's what et war," he declared.

"Er coffing!" exclaimed more than one.

"That's what I said."

"Et have sobered Al up some, anyhow, what ever et was," remarked one of the men. "He war rollin' when he left hyar."

"Waal," said the new-comer, "ef et war a coffing yer seen, yer needn't 'cuse me of bringin' et; I don't deal in that line or furnyiture."

This raised a little ripple of laughter.

"Yer must 'a' dreamed et, Peerscumsh," bantered one man.

"Dream nothin'," snapped Tecumseh, indig-

nantly. "Reckon I knows a coffing when I sees et."

"But is yer sure et was ther rale article? Meby et was only a loose board that dropped down off ther sidin' of yer shebang."

"You jest come erlong wi' me, an' I'll show ye that et wasn't no board off o' ther sidin', but ther real thing," Tecumseh invited. "Didn't it jump up at me when I went ter go in?"

This brought forth a howl of laughter.

The idea of a coffin's having power to move of itself!

"But I tell yer et ar' so!" insisted Tecumseh, getting mad. "I hadn't no sooner stepped on ther stoop 'n what et jumped up an' bit me a lick that sent me spinnin' out inter ther road, an' that et kem down on top o' me ker-thump! Come erlong, ef yer don't think I'm tellin' ye straight."

A little more urging, and several fellows agreed to accompany him back to his shanty, and they set forth.

And then it was that the new-comers applied for lodging at the Never-Get-Left, only to find that place full, like the hotel, and that they could not be accommodated.

For the moment Adam Tablet was in a quandary. Had he been alone, it would have mattered little where he slept, but for his slender brother some sort of decent shelter was necessary and must be had.

CHAPTER IV.

MESSAGE OF MYSTERY.

"HASN'T yer got a cubby-hole nowhar that we kin crawl inter?" insisted the elder of the strangers.

"Nary a hole anywhar," Snickerson declared. "We is as full as a tick, same as they is over at the hotel."

"That ar' bad, mighty bad. Yer saloon ruther belies its name, if that's its name what we've got up thar over ther bar—Never-Get-Left."

"Yas, that's ther name of et, stranger; an' I don't see how et belies itself, as yer calls et."

"Why, ther name ar' Never-Get-Left, but I have got left purty bad, et seems."

"That's you, me friend; not ther saloon. Ther saloon ar' all right."

"Oh, I see; ther odds is ther difference, I take et."

"That's erbout ther size of et, stranger."

"What be we goin' ter do, Willie, lad?" the red-bearded traveler asked, as he turned to his companion.

"I don't know, Adam," was the response. "It looks as though we shall have to camp out."

"But you can't do nothin' like that, yer knows yer can't; et would be ther death of ye."

"Maybe we can find room to crawl into the stable with the mules. That will be better than nothing."

"And not much better, neither. I reckon I have an idee that will beat that all out o' time Willie, me son."

"Good thing ef yer has," put in the proprietor. "Et ain't likely yer will find ary stable fer yer mules, let alone yourselves. That's only one in ther camp, an' that's at ther hotel an' et ar' cram full."

"What is your idea, Adam?" the younger brother asked.

"Why, mebby we kin find a shanty that's ter rent," the elder brother explained.

"I doubt et," said Snickerson. "Thar ain't one but what's tooken. Fact is, ther hull camp ar' fuller'n et kin hold, stranger."

"So et seems ter be," agreed the traveler. "Does ary man hyar know of ary cabin or shanty what me an' me pard kin hire?" turning to the crowd.

They were still on their mules, just as they had entered the room, and the proprietor was still eying them nervously.

No one knew of a shanty to be had, but one or two had offered to share their humble quarters with the strangers, a proposition that was under consideration when Tecumseh returned.

He bounded into the room with a whoop.

"Et wa'n't no coffing, bey?" he shouted. "Jest cast yer eyes hyar an' see!"

As he spoke he waved his hand toward the door, and those who had gone out with him entered bearing a rude coffin.

"B'thunder et ar', sure enough!" exclaimed Snickerson.

"Jest as if I didn't know et wasn't snakes!" sneered Tecumseh.

The new-comers had turned to face the door, and took a look at the rude coffin as the men put it down.

"An' jest as if Willie an' me had lugged sech a thing as that all ther way hyer ter put afore yer door," the elder brother observed.

Said one man:

"Somebody hyar must hev gone inter the undertakin' business."

"Yas," from another; "an' he hev sent Peerscumsh a sample free gratis fer nothin' ter advertise his biz."

"Thinkin' he'd be about ther fu'st galoot what would need one, eh?" struck in yet another.

"Et ar' a' warnin' ter let up on hard drink, Al."

"You ber darn!" Tecumseh growled. "Et ar' some darn witch-work, that's what et ar', an' you kin bet yer boots that I don't sleep in that shanty this night, not ef I know et."

"What's that you say?" quickly caught up the red-bearded stranger.

"I say yer don't ketch this hyar rooster sleepin' thar this night. Et ar' a bad omen ter find a coffing by yer door."

"That's what I've heard," the stranger agreed. "Et sartainly looks that way, anyhow. What will yer take fer ther use of yer shanty? Me an' my pard can't get no lodgin'."

"Dare yer sleep thar?"

"Sartainly. Ther coffing must 'a' been fer you; we ain't in et, ez et wur, this time."

"How long do yer want ther shebang?"

"I'll take et fer a week, ef yer terms don't overtop my pile."

"Give me five dollars in ther coin of ther realm, an' et ar' your shebang fer ther period stipulated."

"Et ar' a bargain. I'll do et, if I kin rake up ther needful. We ain't overflush, me an' my pard, an' I'm hyar lookin' fer work anyhow."

He went down into one pocket, then into another, fishing up a little money from each, but couldn't seem to reach the amount, so he turned to his slender companion and demanded:

"Have you got any of ther stuff about ye, Willie? Ef yer hasn't, I'm afraid we're left ergain."

"I think I've got some small change, but I don't know how much," was the response.

The younger felt in his pockets, then, and drew out some change, and with it came out a wadded bill.

This he opened and looked at, as if with surprise.

"Here's something I had forgot," he said. "It will help you out nicely."

"What ar' et, lad?"

"A two-dollar bill."

"A two-dollar in ther good green! My, but we ar' better off 'n I thort we was, Willie."

The elder brother accepted it, made up the right amount and passed it over to Tecumseh, and the bargain was sealed.

"And now ef yer will please ter get them 'ar mules out of here," requested the proprietor. "Et ar' somethin' we ain't used to, hyar."

"Sartainly, sir, sartainly!" promised the traveler of the red beard. "We is goin' now. Friend," to Tecumseh, "will you escort us to this hyar dug-out o' yours? Et ar' a small favor, an'—"

"Ter be sure," agreed Tecumseh. "Come right erlong. Yer can't be expected ter guess which mansion ar' mine, that's a fact."

He started for the door, and the travelers started to follow, but a pace or two brought them to the coffin, and there they stopped.

"See hyar," the elder traveler called out.

"What ar' et?" asked the camp bummer.

"Thar's somethin' in this hyar coffing o' yours."

"Wh—what!"

"I say thar's somethin' in ther coffing."

Those immediately near stooped to examine the thing to ascertain.

The lower part of the coffin was covered over with its lid, only the upper quarter being open.

Within the open end, and just far enough up to catch the searching eye, was a something white that had drawn attention.

One man reached within and drew it out.

It proved to be a piece of white card, on which something was written.

"Le's see et," requested the red-bearded stranger on the mule, putting out his hand in a way that forestalled refusal.

It was handed to him, and after looking at it for a moment in silence, he read it out aloud. It was to the following effect:

"To THE FINDER:

"Accept this coffin as a gentle reminder of what you will be in need of if you become too curious about certain things which don't concern you. You won't be warned again, but at the next offense you will be in it. Bear it in mind."

"COMMITTEE OF COMPELSION."

As soon as he had read it, the eyes of the stranger sought the face of Mr. Tecumseh.

The fellow had paled, and was looking de-

cidedly uncomfortable. The rest of the crowd looked at the stranger.

"What do yer make out of et?" queried Snickerson.

"I don't make anything out of et," answered the reader. "Et isn't addressed ter me."

"That ar so et says ther finder."

"An that war Peerscumshe!"

"But darn me ef I know anything erbout et," Tecumseh protested.

"Et war against your door, anyhow, 'cordin' to yer own tell," reminded the proprietor.

"How 'bout ther Committee o' Compulsion?" asked Adam Tablet.

"Never heerd 'on 'em afore," answered Snickerson.

"Et seems ter be somethin' of a mystery then, don't et?"

"That's jest what et do, fer a fact."

"I tell yer et ar' witches," insisted Tecumseh. "Et ar ther wu'st kind o' luck ter meet mules by moonlight, as I have often heerd tell."

"Et might a' been wuss luck fer you, ef we hadn't stopped afore we met ye," reminded Adam Tablet. "You was goin' et blind, an' rollin' all over ther road an' if we hadn't stopped we'd a' run over ye."

"Mules ha'n't got nothin' ter do wi' this hyar coffing," declared Snooks Snickerson. "Thar's a mystery hyar bigger'n both mules tergether. Whar did ther coffing come from? Who is ther Committee o' Compulsion? An' what grudge hev they got ergaist Peerscumshe?"

"That's ther way ter put et," cried Mr. Tablet. "You was cut out fer a lawyer, but spilt in ther bakin'. Then's ther proper questions, an' et bit's me you is ther proper man ter find out all about et. I ain't in et, ye know, seein' I'm a stranger hyar, but mebby I will be in et, as I'm goin' ter take that shanty."

"By ther way, who is ye?" asked Snickerson.

"Adam Tablet, at yer service; an' me younger brother Willyum, Willie fer short."

Other questions were asked, similar to what have been quoted before, all of which were promptly answered by Mr. Tablet.

And finally he and his young brother took leave of the saloon, and, guided by Tecumseh, set out in the direction of that citizen's cabin, or shanty.

The coffin had been left in the saloon, a mystery that none could solve.

The camp bummer threw open his residence for inspection, and finding it to be in a fair state of cleanliness, the travelers took possession.

When they had closed the door, having parted with the owner and secured the mules in the rear, they sat down to talk over the situation and to speculate upon the mystery of the coffin.

They did not talk long, however. The hour was already late, they were weary, and after making sure the shanty was securely fastened they prepared their bed on the floor and were soon asleep. A little later the saloon closed, the lights went out, and soon the camp was wrapped in slumber.

CHAPTER V.

DICK AT THE MINE.

NOTHING happened to interrupt. The camp slept on, and in due time morning dawned.

Adam Tablet was abroad early, scouting around for something to eat.

As soon as the one store of the place was open he was a customer, laying in provisions.

By the time Adam and his slender brother had breakfasted, the camp was up and ready to begin the business of the day.

Leaving Willie, as he called him, at the shanty, Adam made his way to the hotel, where he made inquiry for the boss of the Peck o' Dirt Mine.

Mr. Mansen Gilberts, the manager of the mine, happened to be in the bar-room at the time, and he was directed to him.

"Good-mornin', sir," Adam greeted, touching his hat.

"What do you want?" was the blunt question, passing the greeting.

"Ther dispenser of p'izen thar says you is ther boss of ther Peck o' Dirt. I want ter see ye."

"Well, what of it? What do you want to see me for?"

"I want ter hit ye fer a job, that's what."

"Don't want any men."

"But I want a job though, an' mighty bad."

"Can't help that, we are full. Sorry for you but it can't be helped."

"See here, I am a square feller, an' I'm giv-

in' ye a square tip. I have got ter have work or starve."

"Good heavens, man, this mine isn't a charity institution! We have got a bigger pension roll now than we know what to do with."

"Then it's all up," sighed the supplicant. "I don't know what I'll do. I wouldn't keer so much fer meself, but it's me younger brother what'll have ter suffer. Et's hard."

"Who are you, and where are you from?"

"My name is Adam Tablet, and I'm last from Hard-up Camp. Couldn't get any work there, and so struck out fer here. Ther name o' this camp sort o' struck my fancy, seein' as it was my last chance. an' I was told I might git work hyar."

"Who told you that?"

"A man named Mister Sharp."

The mine-manager started and looked at the man keenly.

"Mr. Sharp?" he repeated, slowly.

"Yes, he said he knew you, an' that he was most sure you'd hire me."

"And he sent you here?"

"Waal, yes, it was him that ruther headed me this way."

"If that's the case I'll have to see what I can do for you. I'm going to the mine now, so come along with me."

Mansen Gilberts left the room, Adam Tablet following him, and went straight to the office of the mine.

He was manager and superintendent of the mine together, and was always on hand early.

It was near time to begin the work of the day, and the men were gathering.

Most of them cast looks of curiosity upon the red-whiskered stranger.

The manager spoke to the men, gave some directions to a foreman, and opened the office and told Tablet to enter.

"So," he said, "you are the man I am looking for, are you?"

"I suppose I am," was the answer, "if you were looking for Dick Bristol."

"Deadwood Dick, you mean."

"Yes; either name will fetch me when I'm called."

"No one could ever suspect you, though I never saw your face before. I take it you are in disguise."

"Slightly so, I admit."

"Why didn't you tell me right out who you are?"

"Didn't consider it safe, with other ears around. It isn't hardly safe here, but we'll take the risk."

"I see you are full of caution."

"Have to be."

"Well, about the case; do you think you can make anything out of it?"

"I don't know. That remains to be seen. First, I must get established here as a common laborer, putting in my time at the mine, and having the evenings to scout around in."

"All right, that is as good as done."

"My name is Adam Tablet, don't forget that."

"I won't."

"And I have a young partner with me whom I call Willie."

"Where is he?"

"At the shanty. He passes for my younger brother."

"What shanty have you got?"

"I believe the fellow who owns it is called Tecumseh."

"The greatest bummer in the camp. I know him well enough. Had the wits almost frightened out of him last night, I hear."

"By the coffin he found, leaning against the door of his shanty."

"Yes."

"There is something back of that piece of business."

"You think so?"

"I certainly do. Who is this Committee of Compulsion, think you?"

"You ask me too much."

"Never heard of them before?"

"No; something new."

"We'll have to find out, if we can, and I think I know where to begin."

"Ha! then you are on the trail already, are you?"

"I don't know, but it strikes me that the person that coffin was intended for was the occupant of that shanty."

"That's so; it looks that way."

"And there's some reason why they have warned him. It is just possible that he knows something."

"You may be right; but do you think that has anything to do with our case?"

"I don't know. Possibly it has."

"Have you made any inquiries concerning Jim Fiddler's ground?"

"My pard and I came through Jim Fiddler's ground last night."

"The deuce you did!" in greatest surprise.

"We did just that, but we had to submit to being blindfolded."

"Little good it did you, then."

"Don't you be too sure of that. I attended to the blindfolding of my little partner."

"Hal! that looks more like it. What did you find out?"

"We got some pointers, enough to begin work on. But suppose you tell me all you can about it!"

"I have done so already in my letters to you, sir. We have grown tired of the game this Jim Fiddler is playing, and we mean to break it up if we can."

"Exactly; you told me that."

"You see, he takes it into his head occasionally to hunt for that lost gold, and he does it by night. He posts guardsmen on all the trails, and not a soul can pass till he gives permission."

"Rather a nuisance for the late traveler!"

"As no doubt you came near finding out last night."

"Yes; we were stopped all in good style, as we expected to be."

"As I say, it has got to be a tiresome thing, and we mean to break it up. We have never seen this man Fiddler, and I begin to think there is more back of it than is to be seen from the front."

"It is quite likely that you are right. We'll investigate the thing a little on the quiet. Anything particular to tell me?"

"No, I guess not."

"Then take me out and put me at work. Give me something that won't be too rough on my hands."

"All right, come along with me, Tablet."

Mr. Gilberts rose and stepped out through a back door, and his new employee followed.

Crossing over to the tunnel, the manager there looked up the foreman and put the new man under his charge, with directions what he was to do.

The foreman was one Jackson Budge.

He was a good sort of a fellow, and was pretty well liked.

But among the men was one tough customer who was called Hard-hitter Jeems.

He was a bully of the bullwhacker type, one who always liked to have his own way, and who 'most always did, too.

It so happened that the work that had been given the new-comer was work that Jeems had been doing for a time, in a temporary way, and he looked upon it as his own.

Perhaps there was some justice in his claim to the post, but that had nothing to do with the new-comer, and the manager had a right to make whatever change he saw fit, undoubtedly.

The manager was brief and direct in what he had to say, and went away at once, and as he was a man of few words and those full of business every time, there was but one thing for the foreman to do.

"I'm afraid this is going to make trouble," Budge remarked to Dick, as he led the way.

"How is that?" Dick asked.

"Why, it ousts one of ther worst men I've got ter deal with."

"That's rather rough on him. It don't put him out altogether, does it?"

"No, but he'll have to take harder work."

"I'm sorry fer that. After I git my hands hardened up a leetle, though, I'll change with him, if it's all right."

"That won't be no use, fer if ther boss has said this is ther job you is ter have that settles et."

"You're not afraid of this man, be ye?"

"He's no kitten. He is called Hard-hitter Jeems, and he kin handle anything that he's ever tackled yet."

"A bad man, hey? Waal, I hope thar won't be no trouble."

In a moment more they were at the place where the men were at work, and Dick singled out Mr. Jeems at a glance.

He was a strapping big fellow, with the frame of a giant, and as ugly and surly a face as Dick had ever seen. He was indeed no kitten, as Budge had said.

"Hard-hitter," said the foreman, rather timidly, 'ther boss has ordered me to make a change."

The big fellow looked up, eyed the new-comer, and responded:

"He hev, hev?"

"Yes; this man is to take your place there,

and you will have to go back to your old work for the present."

"That's what ther boss sez, is et?" the giant bullwhacker sneered. "Waal, I have got somethin' ter say about that meself, I ruther guess."

"Orders is orders, here, yer know, Jeems."

"Yas; an' right is right. This hyar post ar' mine, an' I means ter hold et. Not that I wants ter make trouble fer you, Budge, but I ain't goin' ter 'low no darn red-headed galoot of a stranger ter come erlong and oust me, and don't ye forget that."

And the look upon his face certainly went to indicate that he meant it.

CHAPTER VI.

SHOWS HOW THE OLD THING WORKED.

THERE was an awkward pause for a moment. It was plain that the foreman was not the man for the emergency.

He had not the muscle, neither the "sand," to manage the matter in the way it required.

"Do you mean to say that you won't 'bey orders?" he demanded.

"That's what I means this hyar time," was the firm and defiant retort.

"Then I'll have ter report ye ter Gilberts."

"Yer kin report an' be darn."

"But you know what that will mean; you'll be bounced as sure as you live."

"An' if I am I'll take et out o' your hide, so now ye kin do jest what yer please about et."

"Kin I chip in a word, pard?" spoke Dick, at that point.

"Yer kin chip in as many as yer likes," was the snarl he got from Mr. Jeems.

"Waal, yer see et ar' like this: I hev kem hyar about strapped, wi' a pard on my hands what can't do hard work, an' I hit yer boss fer a job. I had ter tell him my hands wasn't very hard, an' he said he'd give me a light post fer a day or two till I got 'em in shape."

"Ther doose he did!"

"Yas; an' ef you'll let me in wi'out a kick yer will do a favor all around, an' help a feller critter ter turn an honest dollar an' git a start. Yer will find me white clear through an' through, an' not a bad sort o' feller ter tie to. What do yer say?"

"Yer has heard my say already."

"Then yer won't do et?"

"In course I won't! What do yer take me fer?"

"I've got ter go ter work, fer et ar' my last chance, yer see, an' that's why ther name o' this hyar camp had sech a charm fer me."

"Waal, I don't keer how soon yer goes ter work; jump right in ther with ther rest of ther men, an' hump yerself ter git ther fer all ye're worth. Nobody is goin' ter kick erbout that."

"But my hands will play out before noon, fer ye see I haven't done no real hard work sence I was sick, an' then I'll be as bad off as I am now. Yours look as if they was blister-proof an' lined wi' leather. Come, be easy on a poor feller."

"Nixey, I ain't no darn charity concern. Go ter work ther or git out, that's all."

Dick turned and looked at the foreman in a questioning way.

That individual was in something of a dilemma. He must obey the manager, but he feared the bullwhacker.

"Thar ain't but one thing fer me ter do," he spoke.

"An' yer kin do that jest ez soon as yer likes, on ther condition I named," Hard-hitter Jeems defied.

"That's what I'll have ter do, an' you know what ther result will be. I'm hyar ter carry out ther boss's orders, but you is a bigger man 'n I am. I can't fire ye out alone, but ther hull gang of us kin."

"Et won't be healthy fer ther one what tries et on," was the snarl.

All the other men were neglecting their work while they looked on and gave attention to what was being said.

"We'll have ter see about that," said Mr. Budge, as he moved off. "Go to work, men, and I'll be back in about two minutes."

He started off, the men resumed their work, except Hard-hitter, and Dick leaned back against the wall to await the foreman's return.

Barely had Mr. Budge got out of hearing, however, when Hard-hitter Jeems advanced to where Dick stood, and shaking his fist at him, bellowed out:

"Do yer know I've a notion ter bu'st yer nose fer ye, ye white-livered sneak! Wull, I have,

an' fer jest two cents an a button I'd do et, too. Yer has no biz ter come hyar, anyhow."

"I was under ther impression that this hyar is a free country," was the very cool and easy response.

Dick had his arms folded, and was leaning with his back against the rocky wall of the tunnel. He did not seem to be at all alarmed.

"Oh, yer did, did yer?" sneered the bullwhacker.

"Yas; that's what I thought about et."

"Wull, yer made a big mistake. Et ar' free fer ther galoot what's got lots of ther dudads, an' fer him what's got ther muscle ter stand up fer his rights; all ther rest is slaves."

"Thar's more truth 'n poetry in what yer says, I have ter admit," Dick made response to that.

"An' I am one of ther fellers what travels on his muscle," the Hard-hitter declared, proudly.

"I'm glad ter hear et, I'm sure," was the easy taunt.

"Don't yer believe et? Jest ask any of ther boyees hyar ef et ain't so."

"Oh, I'm willing to take yer word fer et."

"But, that don't settle my grudge wi' you," swinging one of his ponderous fists close to Dick's face. "I've a notion ter hit ye one, jest fer luck, ye red-whiskered bunch o' nothin'!"

"Please don't stick yer fist so close ter my nose," Dick requested.

"An' why not, I'd like ter know? Reckon I'll stick et whar I please, an' not ask you."

"An' I tells yer ter keep et away," Dick commanded. "Et don't smell good."

This made the other men laugh, and made Hard-hitter Jeems boil with rage in a second.

"Smells bad, do et?" he cried. "I'll let yer see how et feels then, an' I guess ye'll say et feels bad, too!"

And with that he swung his arm around and aimed a blow at Dick's nose.

But, something happened; the blow miscarried. One of Dick's arms described a half circle like a flash of light, and the bullwhacker howled.

Dick's iron-like knuckles had caught him on the forearm with a force that made him feel sick for the moment with pain, and his arm fell almost helpless at his side. It was a surprise for all.

"Waal, how do et feel?" Dick quietly asked.

The man hardly knew what had happened to him at all.

"I'll show ye how et feels!" he bellowed. "I'll show yer!"

"That was what you tried ter do. It felt a little soft, that was all."

And then Mr. Jeems bellowed in earnest, and all the rest of the men laughed heartily.

Said one man:

"Yer had better look out now, Mister Stranger, fer Jeems ar' a bad man when his dander is riz, an' et ar' right up on eend now."

"Oh, he wouldn't harm anybody," Dick quietly assumed.

"He wouldn't, hey!" bellowed the bullwhacker. "I'll show ye, blame yer rusty conk! I'll mash ye to a jelly this hyar time. I wasn't goin' ter hit ye hard, but now I'll jest lam ye fer keeps!"

"You had better not," lazily. "Better scratch your ear!"

"I'll show yer, an' hyar goes— Woughff!"

He had sent out a quick, sharp blow, as he spoke, and Dick's head moving a few inches away his fist had struck the wall with a spat.

"Ooh!" he screamed. "Woughff! Curse you! Blazes! Outch!"

And with the injured fist tucked under his arm on the other side, he danced around there at a lively rate.

The men were now laughing at his misfortunes, for which he deserved no sympathy.

"What is the matter?" inquired Dick.

"Matter! Blast yer bones, I'm goin' ter show ye mighty soon what's ther matter!"

"Haven't you done about all ther showing that is good fer ye? Seems ter me yer has got ther wu'st of et so far."

"But I'll mean biz this hyar time, yer kin jest bet! Dang ye! what did yer move yer head fer? Didn't yer know I'd hit ther rock? Saay!"

"I knowed purty well that yer would hit my nose ef I didn't move," was the cool and easy answer.

By this time it had begun to dawn upon the rest of the men that the new-comer was a better man than they had sized him up to be at first blush.

"Et war purty neat done, anyhow," ventured one.

"An' yer can't blame him fer dodgin'," put in another.

"He won't dodge no more," bellowed Jeems.

"I'm goin' ter take all ther fun out o' him, jest as soon as I kin use me hand. I'll show him whose place he ar' goin' ter come hyar an' take."

"Ef yer will take a fool's advice, yer will go jest a leetle slow," warned Dick. "Thar may be snags around what yer will run up ergoinst, ef yer keeps on. Yer had better cool off an' be satisfied wi' what ye've got."

"I'm goin' ter saterfy you! Talk erbout snags—right hyar's ther wu'st old snag you ever heerd tell on, an' don't ye forgit et."

"I didn't come hyar ter fight; I kem hyar ter work, me friend."

"Waal, yer will have ter do ther one, now, but yer won't do ther other, I'm tellin' ye."

"We'll see."

"You bet yer will! Yer won't be in no condition ter work for a month, after I git done wi' ye!"

"How terrible that will be. Oh please let up!" sarcastically.

"Darn ye, is ye standin' thar makin' fun o' me?"

Dick still had his arms folded, and was leaning idly against the wall the same as at first.

"Bless ye, no," he responded. "I wouldn't think o' doin' sech a thing as that, an' I hope yer won't think I would."

"But that's jest what ye be doin', blast ye! I'll take et out of ye! Look out fer yerself this time, fer I'm b'ilin' cl'ar over now."

"I'm lookin'."

With his arms still folded, the man's defiance looked like foolhardiness.

"Thar won't be no need o' my leavin' my place ter make room fer ye when I git done wi' ye," the bullwhacker cried. "Yer won't be fit fer duty, I'm tellin' ye. Now git ready!"

He jumped forward, with arms up, but did not strike out for fear of another taste of the hard wall. He danced and sparred and jumped around, trying to invite Dick away from the wall, but it was of no use.

Dick's arms were still folded, and he looked utterly careless about the matter.

"Come on!" cried Hard-hitter. "Come right on, ef yer wants ter fight! Step right up an' take yer medicine, fer ye has got ter take et anyhow, even ef I have ter force et down yer neck. Step right up hyar, I say, or I'll lam ye right whar ye stand."

But Dick did not accept, and finally the fellow struck out at him.

Dick's arms unfolded as by a spring; one of them swung around like a flash; the bullwhacker's blow was brushed aside with a force that turned the fellow clear around, and one of Dick's feet shot out, lifting him with a kick and sending him sprawling half way across the drift they were in.

CHAPTER VII.

HE RECKONED WITHOUT HIS HOST.

JUST at that moment Jackson Budge came in. And at his heels came the manager of the mine, Mr. Gilberts.

"Hello!" the latter exclaimed, "what is the meaning of this? What's the matter?"

Hard-hitter Jeems was bellowing like a bull, as, on all-fours, he was trying to scramble up from a heap of loose ore.

"Thar's goin' ter be a funeral, that's what's ther matter!" he roared. "I'm goin' ter see ther liver o' that red-headed galoot afore he knows et!"

The men around were all laughing, and with a glance at Dick, the manager took in the situation and knew about what had been taking place. The bullwhacker giant had evidently found his master.

As for Jackson Budge, he could only look on in open-mouthed amazement. What he saw was something that he could hardly believe. Could it really be that the terror of the camp was there on his hands and knees pawing around on the ore-heaps?

"You don't seem to have made much of a success of your efforts in that direction, so far," remarked Mr. Gilberts. "Why didn't you obey my order when I sent it by your foreman? I am done with you, sir."

"Don't yer talk to me now," cried the angered Jeems, rising to his feet. "I'm goin' ter finish this hyar cuss afore I does anything else. I'll show him he can't come hyar an' throw me out o' my place by ther neck an' heels."

"You touch him at your peril!" warned the manager.

A revolver gleamed in his grasp.

Hard-hitter saw this, and drew back a little.

"I'll have you know that I am manager of this concern," Mr. Gilberts said in stern tone, "and my orders have got to be obeyed."

"But yer ain't givin' me no fair deal," Mr. Jeems complained.

"You have no call to quarrel with the treatment you have received, sir. You have been trying to rule things here for some time, and now I am done with you. Get right out of here."

"No, I'll be ripped ef I do!" was the defiant retort. "I'm goin' ter polish off this sneakin' galoot afore I mosey out, an' that settles et. I'll show yer that if yer is boss of ther mine yer don't own me, an'—"

"Stop! If you advance another step that way I'll drop you!"

There was a ring about the manager's voice that showed that he meant just what he said.

The fellow stopped, and slunk toward the opening.

"Wull, yer has got ther drop on me now," he grated, "but that don't settle ther case. I'll tend ter him later on, an' mebby ter you, too."

And with that, and a shake of his fist at Dick, he shambled out of the place and went off.

"I'm afraid that man will make trouble for you, Tablet," spoke the manager, then, to Dick. "He has the reputation of a bad man, and you will have to look out for him."

"I reckon I kin take keer of meself against him," was the response.

"Anyhow, look out for him. He has made trouble enough for me, and I'm not a bit sorry he's gone, though I look for more trouble now than ever. But, he had better not go too far or he may get a pill."

"What he will git, sometime," prophesied Jackson Budge.

"And you, Jackson, and the rest of you, just take sides with Tablet here, and give him protection if he needs it."

"We'll do that," was the ready promise.

And said one man:

"I don't reckon he will want a deal o' help, ther way he handles himself in a scrimmage."

"Well, it is to be hoped so, anyhow. Now, Tablet, you go to work there as Mr. Budge will direct you, and be under his directions."

And for the time being that settled the matter.

Mr. Gilberts went away, and the men fell to their work as usual.

The forenoon soon passed, and at noon the men knocked off for the usual hour of rest.

Dick had done his work well, and in a way that proved he was no stranger to the ways and manners of mining life.

Leaving the mine with the rest of the men, he went down into the camp and made his way in all haste to the shanty where he had left his "pard."

His mind had not been easy since his trouble with the bullwhacker, and he was somewhat anxious to know how things had been going since his absence. He knew he had made a bad enemy.

The sight of his "pard" at the door as he approached, however, assured him on one point.

When he came to the shanty he found that his dinner was awaiting him, and closed the door after him.

"Well, little pard," he greeted, catching his wife to him and giving her a kiss, "this is something entirely new and novel, isn't it?"

"Yes, Dick, it certainly is," she responded, after the embrace. "How do you like being a mine laborer?"

"Can't say that I'd fancy it for a steady thing," Dick laughingly responded. "How would you like to be a mine-laborer's wife, little one?"

She laughed merrily.

"Any life would be happiness enough, with you," she answered.

These remarks had been exchanged in tones too low for any chance listener to overhear.

Dick washed his hands and face, in the true style befitting the character he had assumed, and when that was done the two sat down to their repast.

"Where is your revolver?" Dick presently inquired.

"There on the shelf," Kate answered, pointing to it.

"A mighty poor place for it," Dick chided.

"Why, is there danger?"

"A detective is always in danger, Kate, and you are a detective just as much as I am myself. You must keep your little joker where you can get at it at a moment's notice."

"What are you driving at, Dick, anyhow? Something has happened."

"Well, yes, something has happened, Kate. I have had trouble with about the worst character

the camp can show I suppose, and it is possible that he may come here and try to make trouble for you if he hears about you."

"Let him come, he will find me at home," was the confident response.

"And you want to be ready to receive him, too, if he should come. Take your weapon now and put it in your pocket."

This she did, and Dick went on to tell her all about his trouble with the bullwhacker at the mine, and of the further trouble he looked for.

"You will have to take care," she cautioned.

"Never fear but I will," was the reply. "I am always getting into trouble, but always manage to get out again somehow."

And so they talked on while the meal progressed.

Dick was back at the mine again promptly on time, and had seen nothing of his enemy.

Now this, by the way, was a stage day at Last Chance, and as it was an event that came only once a week, work at the mine stopped in the middle of the afternoon.

Dick had not learned this during the forenoon, and so could not tell Kate of it, and she could not expect him until the usual hour of closing at night; and it is of her we must speak now.

Dick had not been gone from the shanty more than an hour, when a great bushy head was thrust in at the open door.

Kate looked up with a start, and knew at a glance that this must be the man with whom Dick had had the trouble.

"Hello!" he greeted, with a coarse grin, "anybody ter hum?"

"Yes, sir; I'm here," the seeming young man responded.

"Hello! so ye ar'; I kin see ye now, on a close look. I reckon this hyar is ther cabin whar Adam Tablet roosts, hey?"

"This is the place, sir."

"Good ernough. I hev brought a leetle present for him."

Kate felt all confidence, with her revolver handier than the shelf over the table where it had been.

Deadwood Dick had taught her a trick or two about drawing it when it was required in haste, and she was an adept at that thing.

"A present?" she repeated.

"Yas; will yer 'low me ter bring et in?"

"According to what it is."

Mr. Jeems drew in his left hand, which had been out of sight till now, and in its grasp was a coffin.

It was standing on end in front of him with a single move, his handling it as easily as though it had been a toy made of cork.

The coffin was the same one that had been left there at the shanty on the previous evening, and he now brought it from the saloon where it had been since.

"This hyar is what et ar'," he said.

"A coffin!" gasped the youth, springing back. The villainous bullwhacker grinned.

"Et ain't nothin' else, me lad," he declared. "Et ar' a useful article at sartain times."

"But, sir, Adam has no need for anything of that kind. Take it away! What do you mean by bringing such a thing here?"

"Haw! haw! haw! Now that is jest whar ye make yer mistook, me laddy. Adam ar' goin' ter fill this hyar box afore he is a day older, an' I thort I'd make et handy fer ye."

"You had better have a care that somebody else don't fill it."

"Do yer mean ter hint that et might be me?"

"It is quite possible."

"Haw! haw! haw! The coffing ain't built yet what's ter corral ther mortal remains of Hard-bitter Jeems, me fine little buckey."

"But, what is going to happen to Adam?" Kate asked, playing well her part.

"I'm what's goin' ter happen ter him," was the answer. "He has made me his mortal foe, an' I'm ther disease what's goin' ter call him over. Mebby he'll be fetched home all ready fer plantin'."

"You don't mean to kill him?"

"Oh, no; not fer ther world. Haw! haw! haw!"

"I can't allow you to bring that thing in here, sir, indeed I can't."

"Can't help et whether yer kin or not," was the rough retort, "I'm goin' ter tote et in jest ther same."

And with his words he lifted it and stepped into the cabin with it, putting it down upon the floor on the rear side of the room.

When he looked up, the slender youth was not where he had been, but now the door was closed,

and with his back against it the youth was there, covering him with a revolver.

"Get into that coffin and lie down," was the stern, grim order, "or I'll put a leak in you that will make you sick, you bet!"

The jaw of the giant dropped, and he could only stare.

CHAPTER VIII.

HARD-HITTER IN A TIGHT BOX.

"DIDN'T you hear what I said?" the youth demanded, after a moment of silence.

"But yer don't mean et," the astonished bullwhacker gasped. "Come, put away that 'ar thing afore ye do some damage."

"I intend to do damage to you, and that pretty quick, if you don't do as I tell you," was the bold rejoinder. "Into that coffin, I tell you!"

"Thunder! Sonny, I guess yer don't know who yer is talkin' to, does yer? I'm ther terror of ther town, I am. Waugh! Put away that plaything, or I'll haye ter spank ye."

He talked his loudest and looked his fiercest, as though trying to gain the advantage by frightening the youth, but if that was his object he did not gain it. The hand that held the threatening weapon was steady.

"I don't care who or what you are," was the sharp retort. "You have come here with a threat against my brother, and I mean to take care of you till he comes back. I am not to be fooled with, I can tell you. Do you mean to do as I tell you to do? If not—"

Her flashing eyes looked along that glittering tube in a threatening way.

"Hang et, young feller," the bullwhacker parleyed, "I was only jokin' with yer, that's all; haw! haw! haw!"

"Well, I'm not joking with you," was the firm response, "and I'll give you just one minute to get yourself into that coffin. If you are not in it when the time is up I'll drop you into it with a bullet."

"But I tell yer it was all in fun!" the alarmed rascal cried. "I was only playin' off a little joke. I have met yer brother, an' him an' me is ther best o' good friends on short 'quaintance."

"Then no doubt he'll be glad to find you here when he returns; and find you here he will, either dead or alive, and it's your choice which it shall be. Don't you waste any more time now, if you value your life. Into that coffin with you!"

"Darn et, young feller, can't yer listen ter reason? Can't—"

"Into that coffin, I tell you! Your time is getting short, and I mean shoot as sure as you live."

"Et won't hold me. Et ar' too small. I couldn't never get inter that thing, an' I know et."

"Well, then, get as near as you can. Come, I'll count twenty, and then if you are not in, down you go, so in with you!"

There was no mistaking that command.

Cursing roundly, the cowed rascal sat down in the coffin and then leaned over backward and tried to force himself into it.

It was a pretty close fit. The length was all right, but it was too narrow for his broad shoulders at the first effort, and would be a tight squeeze.

"I can't do it," he cried. "Let me off this time, an' I'll take et all back. I didn't mean no harm."

"Get in there, or you'll be the corpus it will hold for burial!"

The revolver was now right near the ruffian's head.

There was no way out of it, so far as he could see, and the thing had to be done.

He made another effort, and managed to get his shoulder down, and there he lay, panting over his exertion.

Scarcely able to move, so close was he held, the terror of the camp was in about as tight a place as he had ever been in his life.

"Now, there you are," remarked the slender youth, "and you wasn't any too soon about it. I expected nothing else than that I should have to muss up the floor with your whisky blood."

"Did yer really mean shoot?" the craven asked.

"You bet your boots I did," was the response.

"And I mean it yet, too, if you make any fuss. You have got to lie right there till my brother comes home."

"Hickory! I'll be dead by that time, sure as ye live, sonny!"

"Then that will save Adam the trouble of killing you, as maybe he will do."

"See here, I beg off. Let me git up an' out o' here, an' ye won't never see hide ner hair o' me again."

"Nary. Put yer arms right down straight there, now, and don't dare to move them. That's it; and now you may go to sleep if you want to."

The fellow having laid his arms as ordered, the youth put his foot on them one after the other and shoved them well in beside him, and then took a seat near the door, weapon in hand.

And there Deadwood Dick found his "pard" when he came home from work a little past mid-afternoon.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "what have we here?"

"Here's a gentleman that called to see you," said Kate, "and I invited him to stay till you came."

"Great snakes, Willie, I should say yer did!" Dick cried. "Why, hillo! my untamable hunkidori; what ar' ye doin' hyar?"

"Let me git out o' hyar," was the pleading response. "I'm most dead. That ar' leetle cuss wouldn't let me move, an' hyar I've been fer two hours an' a haff."

"That's rather rough on ye, I must own, but what business had ye ter come poken yer nose 'round hyar? What did he come hyar fer, Willie? What was he goin' ter do wi' ther coffin, son?"

"Why, he said et was for you, Adam. He said he was going to kill you and put you into it. Said he had brought it as a present. I couldn't have anything of that kind, you know, so I just told him to get into it himself. And, there he is."

Dick smiled under his flaming whiskers, at the situation, with Kate on guard.

That was quite right, Willie, pard, quite right," he complimented. "That war ther proper thing ter do."

"Put, let me out, won't yer?" the fellow begged. "I'm 'most dead, an' that's honest. Let me out, won't yer? We'll call et square."

"All right, git out with yer, an' be off."

The fellow made the effort to get out, but could not move. He was really in a tighter fix than he would have believed.

"Yer does seem ter be in thar purty tight, an' that's ther fact," Dick observed. "Guess I'll have ter help ye some. Guess I kin fetch ye out o' that."

He reached down and laid hold upon the neck of his shirt, and with a strong pull brought him out and landed him on his feet.

"There you are," he said, "an' now yer wants ter slope. Willie, ef he ever comes 'round hyar again, yer wants ter bore him wi'out any parley about et. Let him have et."

"And I will, too," the little "pard" declared.

The burly fellow had nothing to say till he backed to the door and out, when he cried:

"I'll have et in fer ye now, see 'f I don't!"

"Look out!" cried Dick. "You ain't out o' pistol range yet, me hearty."

"I'm off now, but you jest look out fer me, that's all. I'm goin' ter git even with yer."

"All right, let me know when yer begins, an' I'll try an' be on hand. Guess yer will find that I kin hold up my eend."

But it wasn't all over with yet.

Soon there arose a great shout only a little way off.

Quite a crowd of men had been gathered at a little distance from the shanty, in company with Tecumseh.

And now as they raised their shout, Tecumseh began to sing at the top of his weak and quavering voice his only song—

"A frog!—he would!—a woo!—ing go! Whether!—his mother!—would let 'm!—or no! Sing iddley!—diddley!—diddley!—doo!—de-doo!—de-doo!"

Then the crowd shouted again, and began to hoot in a way that let Mr. Jeems know that he was the object at which they were aiming their sportive remarks.

It was easily understood.

These, or some of them, had been at the saloon when Hard-hitter had come in and borrowed the coffin.

He had made his boasts what he was going to do with it, blowing as usual, and when he had gone out Tecumseh and some others had followed him.

They had seen him enter the shanty, and running up, had been there to overhear what had passed within, and now were lying in wait, or had been, for his appearance.

"Ruther a long call yer made!" cried one.

"Must 'a' found ruther a warm welcome, didn't yer?"

"How did yer enjoy yer nap in ther leetle pine box, old man?"

These, and a good many other shouts greeted him, and there was no mistaking the fact that they knew all about it.

"Et was a put-up job on me, that's what et was!" the bullwhacker cried.

And at that the crowd laughed and hooted the more.

How it could have been anything of that sort, he did not undertake to explain to them.

"But et ain't done with yet, et ain't!" he cried. "Thar's more to et, an' you fellers is goin' ter see some fun ef yer lives long enough."

With that he hurried on, eager to get out of sight and out of hearing too if that was possible.

Dick learned all about it from Kate, as soon as the crowd had moved off and they entered the shanty.

"You are a trump, Kate," Dick complimented. "You are a good one. That's the way to do it, every time."

"But I was frightened almost to death at first," Kate declared.

"No matter, as long as you downed your man. Make them believe that you mean it, as I have told you, and you have got them, every time. That's the kind of stuff they are made of."

He then explained why he was home so early, and washed up and prepared to go out and await the coming of the stage.

They locked the shanty and went together down to the hotel, where the crowd was collecting to see the stage come in, and where they mingled with the others.

Only a little time had they been there, when out from the Never-Get-Left came Hard-hitter Jeems, with a bellow and a roar.

He had recovered from his stiffness, and had been adding to his strength a good deal of spirit in the way of the liquid article so-called.

He had caught sight of his enemy, or he had been pointed out to him, and now he meant to square the account at once and in the presence of all this company of witnesses.

"Hyar I come!" he roared. "Look out fer me now!" he screamed. "Now I'm in fer gore, an' don't ye fergit it! Whar's that 'ar galoot what nosed me out at ther Peck o' Dirt? Jest let me git at him!"

He evidently had his eye on him, for he made straight in Dick's direction.

Mr. Tablet, it was noticed, did not run away, but stood and awaited the coming of his terrible foe.

This was about the sort of thing that wild crowd enjoyed, and as soon as Hard-hitter had entered the arena a ring was formed around the pair and they were left face to face.

CHAPTER IX.

SETTLING THE SCORE.

DEADWOOD DICK knew what had to be done now.

It was really no fault of his that the trouble had come.

Hard-hitter was one of those fellows always on the lookout for fight.

He had made the trouble in this case, and meant to push it and make more of it, too.

Dick, in his disguise, did not look like a man who could defend himself in the fistic way to any extent.

Yet those who had seen something of him at the mine had good reason to believe that he could take care of himself at a pinch.

His slender "pard" had stepped back out of the way, and with folded arms, Mr. Adam Tablet stood looking at the furious and half-drunken man before him.

Mr. Hard-hitter had been coming with a rush and a roar, but at the cool front presented to him he rather cooled down before he got quite there. He put on the breaks a little, as it were.

But he continued his bellowing as loudly as ever.

"Hyar I be now!" he roared. "Hyar I be, an' if yer wants ter see me, step up to ther offis! Waugh!"

"Waal, what ef yer is hyar?" demanded Dick, in the broad dialect befitting his assumed character. "Who sent fer ye, anyhow?"

"Who sent fer me, hey? I kem without bein' sent fer, me red-headed galoot. I'm hyar on me own inveration, an' I'm hyar on business, too! Don't yer want ter see me?"

"No; not in p'tic'lar."

"Waal, I'm hyar ter see you."

"I short yer was goin' ter eat me, ther way ye was comin'."

This brought a laugh.

Dick was as cool as an iceberg.

"That was what yer thort, was et?" was the bellow.

"Yas; somethin' like that."

"Wull, what ar' ter hinder my doin' et now? That was jest what I was comin' fer, so yer hit et right."

"Tben why don't yer begin?"

"That's what's ther matter," cried the crowd.

"Walk right in an' swoller him, boots an'all, Jeems."

"I'll tell yer what I'm hyar fer," the bullwhacker yauped, waving his big fists about through the air. "I'm hyer ter mash yer nose fer ye, an' I'm goin' ter do et, too!"

"All right, old boss, wade right in. Yer will find me ter home, I guess."

And it looked as though he would, too.

The crowd was growing impatient for the fun to begin, and men on every hand were throwing taunts at the bullwhacker.

"An' I'm comin' now," he bellowed. "I only wanted to give ye fair warnin' so's yer couldn't say et wasn't fair. Put up yer leetle dubbies, now, an' try ter do yer pootiest."

Dick still kept his arms folded.

"Never mind me," he said, "but look after yer own part of ther business. I'll be ready when you begin, I guess."

"Then ef yer gits yer nose split ther fu'st crack don't blame me."

"Not er tall, sir; et will be my own fault ef I do."

And so the crowd seemed to think.

There was no further excuse for delay, so Mr. Jeems began to spar away in great style.

He danced this way and that, striking out and drawing back, darting forth his head and receding again, all in a comical way.

"He cuts a purty figger, don't he?" Dick called attention.

This brought a howl from the crowd, and Hard-hitter's face grew more red than ever.

"Cuts a purty figger, do he!" he screamed. "I'll cut a purty figger on your snoot now, an' one that yer will carry, too!"

With that he sprung forward and delivered the first blow.

But somehow it didn't seem to take effect. His arm was brushed aside, and he was turned half around.

When he looked, there stood his foe with arms still folded.

"That's a funny way ter hit a feller," Dick sneered.

And then again the crowd laughed and hooted.

"Blast yer! I'll show yer now!"

He made a grand rush this time, striking out with both fists with blows thick and fast.

But he might as well have tried to hit a shadow.

Not a blow could get home.

Dick's dainty fists flashed about like lightning, and the giant's own were knocked aside with an ease that must have surprised him not a little.

Finally, half out of breath, he sprung back, gasping:

"What fer a darn masheen is yer, anyhow! Seems ter me that yer has ther knack o' boxin' down fine. But I'll show yer yet!"

"Look out he don't show you!" cried one.

"Yer had better make up an' call et square," from another.

"He'll put ye in ther coffing fer keeps ther next time," shouted some one else.

"I'll show him this hyar time!"

Before, the giant bullwhacker had not taken the trouble to remove his hat and coat.

Now he dashed his hat to the ground, jerked off his coat spitefully, and rolled up the sleeves of his dingy red shirt.

The brawny arm he displayed was one to be proud of.

"D'yer see that 'ar?" he demanded, displaying his muscle.

"I see some flabby fat thar, ef that is what yer means," answered his teasing opponent.

It was anything but fat, as everybody knew.

Hard-hitter could split with his fist a bigger and thicker board than any other man in the camp.

"Flabby fat!" he yelled. "I'll show ye how flabby et ar', ef I git a whack at yer with et! Yer will never know what hit yer."

"An' et ar' my business ter see that ye don't hit me," was the response. "But, come, don't hang back so. Let's have this thing over with. You wanted to get at me, so now finish yer job."

Hard-hitter now squared off in better style.

The little science he had at command he called into use.

He drew near with care, his fists well up, and presently his right flew out straight from the shoulder.

It was aimed all right, too, straight for Dick's face, but Dick moved his head just a little to the right and the blow passed over his shoulder.

The next instant there was a spiteful little "spat!" and Mr. Jeems was taken off his feet and laid out on his back in a way that fairly made him see stars, and that brought a grunt out of him as he dropped.

And there stood the red-whiskered Mr. Tablet, as cool as ever.

No one could tell just how it had been done, but the effect of it was patent to all.

The crowd gave a rousing cheer, and by this time every soul in the camp was on the spot to witness this rare treat in the local arena.

For some seconds the bullwacker lay still.

He was dazed by the suddenness of what had happened to him, and perhaps not a little stunned, too.

"I guess yer has fixed him, pardner," said one man.

"Oh, no, he'll be up worse than ever in a minute," responded Dick.

Every eye was upon him, and he was the marvel of the moment. It was plain that the town terror had no chance with him.

His prediction was true.

In a few moments Mr. Jeems rolled over and sat up.

"I reckon my foot must 'a' slipped," he foolishly observed.

The roar that greeted that remark was deafening.

"We reckons both yer hoofs slipped, old man," some one sung out.

"An' they is likely ter slip wuss next time, too."

Dick had his eyes well upon the fellow, for he did not know what manner of attack to look for next.

Once on his feet, Mr. Jeems squared himself again immediately.

"I'll show yer somethin' this hyar time," he gave warning. "Yer is too darn handy with yer boxers, so we'll try et this way."

And even as he uttered the words he proceeded to illustrate.

Jumping right in, regardless of a stinging blow that landed over his eye, he caught Dick in his arms.

With a mighty swing he lifted him clear from the ground, raised him backward over his head, and brought him forward to dash him to the earth.

He had the strength of a giant, and Dick seemed as nothing in his hands with the momentary advantage he had.

But the end was not yet.

As he brought Dick forward and exerted his final effort to hurl him from him, Dick caught hold of his arms and there he clung, and came down upon his feet with all the agility of a cat.

And then it was his turn.

Before Mr. Jeems could recover he had broken his hold and caught him in his best fashion.

Up went the bullwhacker, then, about the same as Dick had been lifted, with the final difference that Dick carried out what he had intended.

Having him raised, he turned him before he could grasp him, and then with a fling sent him sprawling in the dirt, much to the delight of the admiring audience, who were going wild.

Mr. Tablet's showing of strength was a surprise to them all.

"I'll bet that will settle him!" one man cried out.

"Ef he ain't a fool altogether," added another.

"No, he ain't done yet," declared Dick. "I'll have ter do him up brown afore he will be done, as you'll see."

He knew the sort of man he had to deal with.

And he was not mistaken, for when the fellow scrambled to his feet he immediately reached for a weapon.

But that was just what Deadwood Dick had been expecting, and he had him covered with his own brace of revolvers before he could draw.

"I'm right at home at that, too," Dick sang out. "Draw that pop an' you ar' a dead sinner."

The fellow looked foolish, and withdrew his hand from his hip, empty.

"That is better," said Dick. "An' don't yer try et ergain, nuther, fer I am some on ther draw meself. You is bound ter have fight, an' now I'll give et to ye, all yer kin hanker fer. Now square yerself."

He had put away his weapons, and now stepped forward with an air of business.

CHAPTER X.

NEW ARRIVALS IN THE CAMP.

At this sudden change, Mr. Jeems paled a little.

He knew what to expect now, and he was not deceived, either.

With a quick step backward, he made one more effort to draw his revolver, making the quickest move he knew how.

But that was not half quick enough, for the glittering weapons of his foe were covering him again before he could draw, and the effort was futile.

"I tell you yer can't play et that way," Dick warned again. "Try et on jest once more an' I'll have ter drop ye. I'm meanin' business now right from ther beginnin'."

With a surly snarl the bullwhacker let go his hold and brought his hand around in sight.

Dick's weapons had disappeared again almost as soon, and now he advanced with a menacing air that boded ill for Mr. Jeems.

"Defend yerself ef yer can," Dick directed. "You meant ter do me up, an' I means ter return ther compliment ef I am able. Make ready now, an' we'll soon have et over with."

The bullwhacker put up his fists because there was no escape for him, though he looked as though his every inclination was toward running away.

As soon as his fists were up Dick went for him.

He made a feint or two, and then let go straight from the shoulder, first left and then right.

And both fists found the target, too.

The left landed on the bullwhacker's proboscis as a gentle reminder, and the right followed after it and finished the work.

The first tap had staggered the fellow, and taken him somewhat off his equilibrium, and the second lifted him and sent him headlong into the crowd and clear out of the ring.

"Thar," cried Dick, "that settles et, fer ther time bein'. If thar's any more like him around, let me have 'em while I'm in ther humor of ther thing."

"I reckons nobody else ar' a-hankerin' fer any," was the response from some one in the throng.

"Then ye had better see ter that feller, fer he may need help ef he ain't dead. Mebby I broke his neck; I won't say I didn't."

The fellow was found alive good enough, though, but he was unconscious.

He was taken up and carried back to the saloon, and before the excitement had abated the stage arrived.

Had it been on time its passengers would have witnessed the fray, but it was a little late.

It rolled into the camp in the usual style, and drew up at the hotel.

Last Chance was not its destination, so the stop was only a brief one, merely long enough to do necessary business.

The mail and Express stuff were handed out, and while this was being done the passengers were alighting.

The first to get out was a long and lanky individual of the male persuasion, who looked not unlike a shabby preacher.

He was clad in black, in a coat with long tails, he had on a rusty high hat, and a yellow hard-finish collar encircled his skinny neck.

His hair was long behind, but rather sparse; he had on spectacles; and on his hands were what had once been black kid gloves, but which were now principally holes.

He immediately stalked off toward the hotel with long strides.

After him came a woman in dark serviceable attire, helping out a girl of ten, when she had alighted.

The woman was rather peculiar-looking.

She had the appearance of a priggish old maid, with her little curlis before her ears and blue goggles over her eyes.

Following her came a man of rather portly presence, and he helped out a dashing young woman whose good-looks were stamped with an unpleasing boldness.

All followed the lead of the first described, and entered the hotel.

A little later the stage rolled on its way, with a shout from the driver and a yell from the crowd.

Deadwood Dick and his little "pard," having no interest with the mail, did not follow most of the crowd to the post-office, but entered the hotel.

There the first arrival, the long man in black, was pleading with the proprietor for lodgings.

"Sorry, sir," was the answer he got, "but we is full cl'ar to ther top, an' no room fer any more."

"What shall I do?" the man gasped, in evident distress. "I am a poet, sir, a poet; I am not a child of the rough world, but a tender offspring of the muses!"

"That's a bad fix ter be in, I allow," sympathized the landlord, "but I hev give ye ther cold fax in ther case, an' I can't do no more. I opine ye will have ter camp out."

"But, here are ladies!" the poet cried. "What will you do with them? Surely you will not have them cast out, will you?"

"When ther box ar' full, what ar' ye goin' ter do about et?" argued the landlord.

The ladies were now present to speak for themselves.

As the bar-room to your shanty hotel is usually the main entrance, people have to go in that way or stay out.

If the hotel is a degree better in appearance, there is a hall and "parlor" for the convenience of women. The Palace Royal was only a shanty at best.

So, into the bar-room the women had come, and were listening to the exchange of remarks quoted.

"Ob, dear," sighed the pretty but bold beauty, "what shall we do now?"

"Do you mean to tell us there is no accommodation to be had here, sir?" the portly man of middle age demanded.

"That's the size of et," was the answer.

"And isn't there any other hotel in the camp?"

"Nary a nuther."

"This is a deuce of a hole, then!"

"Et's ther last chance in fact as well as in name," the landlord offered, his own little joke.

"So it seems to be."

"Then isn't there any lodging to be had in the place at all, sir?" asked the woman in the curls and goggles.

"Every hole is fuller'n a tick, ma'm."

"Oh, dear! And when does the next stage pass here, sir?"

"This same time next week."

"Worse and worse."

"Well, we are here and something will have to be done," determined the portly man. "Is there anything to build a shanty off?"

"I'll tell yer what mebby kin be done," the landlord started to suggest.

"Well, what is it?"

"How be ye fixed?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"How is your pocket lined?"

"Oh! Why, I'm well fixed, that way."

"Then I think ef yer bid big enough some of ther boyees will move out an' let ye have their roosts. I say mebby they will, but I don't know. They is more hardy ter camp out 'n what wimmen is."

"Hat there is some hope in that. Who has got a shanty to rent, gentlemen? I will pay well. My name is Alban Sturgiss, I'm no beggar, and what I ask for I can pay for. This is my daughter, and I must have shelter for her, you see. Now, who is the first?"

Two or three immediately offered, and Mr. Sturgiss went out with them at once to inspect their palaces.

"That speaks the advantage of ready money," sighed the poet. "I have an overplus of brain, but money is something that I have always had a scant amount of at command. Thus does genius suffer ever."

"And I am in a worse fix, with my little girl on my hands," grieved the lady in the curls and goggles. "What I am going to do, I do not see. Hasn't some married man room in his house for us for a day or two?"

"Ther fact ar', ma'm," responded the landlord, "thar ain't no married men hyar. Them as is married, ain't married, so ter speak, an' them what ain't, can't git nobody ter marry."

"I don't see what I am to do, for my means are limited."

Deadwood Dick stepped to the front.

"Ma'm," he said, "I has got a cabin hyar that I kin share wi' ye fer a week. Me an' my leetle pard hyar kin sleep in ther lean-to, an' et ar' better'n no shelter a tall."

"Are—are you an honest man, sir?"

"Ef I ain't, ma'm, my leetle pard thar is, an' I'd die fer that leetle cuss any day in ther week."

"Yer kin trust Adam Tablet, ma'm, that I'm bettin'," declared one man in the crowd.

"Anyhow, it seems I shall have to do so," sighed the woman. "I will accept your offer, sir. I like the face of this little friend of yours, and if you can be good to him I know you are not a bad man."

"Adam is the best of brothers," the little "pard" praised up.

"Come right erlong then, ma'm," Dick invited, "an' we'll make ye comfortable if we kin."

"But who is going to take me in?" wailed the lanky poet. "I am as good as the rest of them, but no one has compassion on me."

"Ef yer is a poic, the fool-killer will gather ye in when he comes 'round," one rough fellow irreverently jested.

This raised a laugh, and while the room was still ringing Dick and Kate conducted their proteges out.

"Sir, what do you mean?"

So cried the poet, indignantly, when he could be heard.

There was no response, since the man who had spoken evidently did not want to be singled out.

"What mean you, I demand?" was the repeated query. "Know ye not that I am one whom the gods have favored? Look on my brow, and tell me if I am not a poet!"

"That's what yer is, sure," assured Tecumseh, the bummer.

"My friend," cried the lanky individual, extending his hand, "you are of the gifted few. Shake!"

Tecumseh took the hand and shook.

"I am a poet," the lanky one declared. "I am not made, either, but was born a poet. My name is Fergusson Finn, a name that is destined to ring down the aisles of the unborn ages."

"I hope et will," assured Tecumseh, "I hope et will fer a fack. But, et ar' wonderfully dry, don't yer think so, Finny?"

He edged toward the bar as he said this, and the poet took the hint.

The next moment they were cementing their friendship with a glass of the terrible.

CHAPTER XI.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

WHEN Dick and the others reached the cabin, or shanty, they entered and the front door was closed.

"Are we safe from observation here?" the woman asked.

"Yes," answered Kate. "You may speak out here, but in guarded tone, for some one might listen."

"It is better to use all caution," agreed Dick. "It was fortunate we came on ahead of you, Mrs. Makewell, since the camp is so full."

"Yes; for it might have been awkward for us all."

"I was fortunate in getting hold of this cabin or it might have been that way even yet."

The woman had now removed her goggles, and also her hat and a wig from her head.

She appeared a pleasant-faced lady of thirty-five.

The little girl stood near her, and now she stroked her hair.

"Well, I have news for you, Mr. Bristol," she said in cautious tone.

"You have?"

"Yes."

"And what is it?"

"I have seen my hated husband."

"Ha! so soon? Then your eyes are sharp for him."

"He came in the stage with us, sir."

"No!"

"Yes; that man who got out with that brazen-faced thing."

"And he didn't recognize you?"

"No."

"Nor the child?"

"No; how could he? It is five years since he saw us."

"True. Well, we have him now where we can lay our hands on him when we want him, that is sure."

"And we want him as soon as possible. He must sign that paper, sir, with witnesses, and after that I care not what becomes of him."

"We will attend to that; but first I have this other matter to see to. I dare not reveal my identity here till that is off my hands, you see. But, that may not take long."

"And in the mean time the wretch may get away."

"I'll see to it that he does not escape us."

"Well, I suppose I must trust it all to you."

"Yes; do that and I promise you I will bring it out all right for you. Now, you must make yourself comfortable here with my little 'pard,' and I will take the lean-to for myself when it is time to sleep."

"And where are you going now, Dick?" asked Kate.

"Back to the hotel, till supper-time, and after that I shall have to be led by circumstances."

"I have finished the pictures we snapped last night."

"Good enough! I may have use for them pretty soon. Let me have them."

Kate put a flat packet into his hand, and he opened it and examined the pictures it contained.

"Ha! this is the one!" he presently exclaimed.

"The entrance to that cavern, as it looks to be?"

"Yes."

"So I thought you would say. The secret of the place is there, whatever it is."

"Undoubtedly. Well, I will be back again. Be on your guard."

"It isn't likely that Mr. Jeems will trouble me again, the way you punished him," Kate laughed.

"No, I think not. I looked for trouble from him, and I thought I would give him a big dose while I was about it."

There was some further talk among them, and Dick went out and to the hotel.

In the mean time Mr. Sturgiss had secured the use of a cabin, and had taken possession of it with the young woman he called his daughter.

This was between Dick's shanty and the hotel, and as Dick passed he saw them within, looking over the temporary domicile that had fallen to their lot.

"It will do, Zenaide," Dick heard him say.

"You bet," was the response. "Room enough for two."

"Yes; and for callers, too," was the rejoinder; and Dick caught no more.

When he reached the hotel, Fergusson Finn was on the floor spouting poetry, and Tecumseh was applauding with all his might.

"An' now mebby Peerscumshe will favor us wi' a song," one man in the crowd suggested, when the last round of applause had sounded.

"Ha! do you sing, noble friend?" the poet cried.

"Do he sing?" cried another. "He ar' jest a warbler, you bet!"

"I sing a leetle," Tecumseh blushingly admitted.

"Then give us a song, by all means."

"Oh, I couldn't. I don't know only one."

"One is enough. Let us hear it."

"An' I only knows one verse o' that."

"Better than none; go right ahead."

And the crowd joined in the urging, but Tecumseh seemed to hang fire about it.

"Et ar' a treat from me, ef yer will sing," offered the landlord.

"That'll fix et," agreed the singer. "I'll strike in on condition that ye will stop me when ye have had enough."

"We'll do that," one man hastened to promise, "ef we has ter stop ye with a club."

And so urged, Tecumseh struck out—

"A frog!—he would!—a woo!—ing go!

Whether!—his mother!—would let 'm!—or no!

Sing iddley!—diddley!—diddley!—doo!—de-doo!—de-doo!"

The first verse ended, he jumped into the second, which was the same thing over again and so he kept it up until several verses had been rendered.

The crowd applauded, at each verse, but presently Tecumseh's voice began to weaken perceptibly.

"Keep 'er up!" one man shouted. "keep 'er up!"

"Et ar' dry work," answered the bummer. "Can't keep up steam 'thout something in ther b'iler."

"We reckons that wull do, anyhow," said the landlord. "Come up an' git yer tickler."

And Tecumseh came. He never refused anything of that sort.

Besides, he had fairly earned it.

"That was well done, well done indeed," the poet was complimenting. "It was better than I could do myself. But then I am no singer. My best hold is poetry, and at that I lay claim to being chief."

He dashed off into another recitation, to the amusement of all hearers.

Deadwood Dick had his eyes on the fellow the while.

"That chap isn't what he seems, and I'm betting on it," he said to himself. "I wonder what he is up to?"

The poet didn't seem to be anything else, however, to the casual observer, and so Dick was alone in the suspicion he had formed.

"But, child of the gods as I am," the poet presently complained, "I have no hotel to craw

into, and behold, the night cometh on apace. What am I going to do?"

"Lots o' room outdoors," one man suggested.

"Sad is my lot, that I should ever come to that," the mournful sigh.

"Tell yer what I'll do," spoke up Tecumseh.

"What is that, noble friend?"

"I'll share my lodgin' wi' ye."

A roar of laughter greeted his generous offer.

"Noble heart!" cried the poet. "But, where do you repose your weary clay o' nights?"

"Last night I crawled in under ther rear of ther Never-Get-Left, an' slept there like ary rug in a bug."

"Well, if nothing better offers, mayhap I will accept your offer," Mr. Finn promised. "Little I dreamed it would come to such a pass, however."

With another sigh he turned away and sauntered out.

Dick had worked his way near to Tecumseh, and now touched his arm.

"Hello!" Tecumseh exclaimed, seeing who it was. "How did ye rest last night, me friend?"

"Rested fine," Dick answered. "Would ye like ter have another drink of that soul-harrowing bug-juice?"

"I never refuse," was the assurance.

"All right, I'll order a glass of et, an' we'll set down hyar an' have a little talk."

"I'm agreeable ter that."

So Dick ordered the poison, and they sat down.

"Whar's yer own dose?" Tecumseh asked in surprise.

"I don't keer fer any jest now," was Dick's evasive response to that.

We know that it had been months since Dick had tasted a drop of anything of the sort.

He had cut it off slick and clean, and found that he was the better for it. His wind and strength had never been so good.

"Ain't ye well?" Tecumseh urged.

He didn't see how anything short of sickness or death could take away a man's appetite for that sort of thing.

"Oh, yes, I'm well enough," was Dick's response; "but this isn't my time of day to lay in ther infloence. I want ter talk with ye a bit."

"All right, fire ahead."

"You remember that 'ar coffing last night."

"Wull, rather!"

"And you remember the note that was in et."

"You bet!"

"Waal, do yer know I hev been thinkin' about that ar'?"

"What do yer think erbout et?"

"I have an idee that 'ar note was fer you, an' that et ar' resky fer me ter be sleepin' thar in yer place."

"Does yer want ter back out of yer bargain? Yer gits no money back ef yer do. Et ar' yer own loss ef yer throws et up, Mister Tablet."

"Yer don't understand me, quite. Yer see, et hits me thar was a reason fer that 'ar warnin' bein' sent ter you, an' et ain't no more'n fair that ye should put me on me guard."

"I begins ter see."

"Frinstance, mebby ye hev been pokin' yer nose around that 'ar Jim Fiddler's ground, er somethin' o' that sort."

"Sh!" Tecumseh whispered, leaning forward.

"Yer has hit et, pardner."

"Then yer wants ter do ther square thing an' tell me all about et. I don't want ter be in danger an' not know how ter look fer et."

CHAPTER XII.

TECUMSEH TELLS TALES.

TECUMSEH leaned far over toward his new friend, and said:

"I has ther idee, pard, that et ar' best ter be keerful how we talks 'bout sartain things."

"What makes yer think that?"

"Ears around."

"Waal, they can't overhear us, ther way we is talkin' now."

"No; but they kin see us, an' mebby they'll spect I'm tellin' tales out o' school."

"Then yer thinks thar is foes about?"

"Ez like ez not."

"Who be they?"

"Saay, did yer ever see a leetle camp like this so all-fired full o' boarders afore?"

"Never did, that's so."

"An' they is galoots what don't do no work, nuther."

"That ar' queer, ter say ther least."

"Et ar' more'n queer."

Fiddler? Did yer ever see any man what's seen him?"

"No; but then I'm a stranger hyar."

"Et wouldn't make no difference ef yer had been hyar a thousan' years."

"Yer talks ez ef yer didn't b'lieve thar was any sech man."

"That's et; yer has hit et ergain."

"Saay, I'm gittin' interested, pardner. Let me fill that 'ar glass up fer ye ergain."

"I don't mind ef yer do."

Dick was playing his best, in his assumed character, and taking the glass he had it refilled.

"Yer has struck a snap," he said, with a grin, as he gave it to Tecumseh. "I am interested in what yer tells me though, so et's all right."

"What was I sayin'?" the bummer asked.

"Yer was jest goin' ter tell me what happened."

"What happened?"

"Yes: don't yer know? Yer done somethin' that made 'em send that 'ar coffin to ye, with their warnin' in et."

Tecumseh glanced around furtively.

"Et ar' resky," he declared, "but I ruther likes ye, an' I'll chance et."

"Fer et may be ther means o' savin' my neck, yer know," Dick reminded.

"That's so. Waal, ther other night I took et inter my head ter foller some o' these hyar fellers, an' I done so. An' they went right off inter Fiddler's land, straight."

"Ah-hal!"

"Yas; straight. An' I after 'em. I hadn't no tangle in my legs then, an' I done et brown. An' what do yer think I seen?"

"Give et up."

"I seen 'em enter a cave, an' thar I heerd mighty queer noises."

"Yer don't tell!"

"Sure ez ye live. An' I got a good place an' I watched."

"An' what did yer see?"

Dick was leaning forward too, and his eyes were wide open as though with the most intense excitement.

And this breathless interest encouraged Tecumseh the more, and made him feel like a very important personage filled with mystery.

"What did I see?" he repeated. "What didn't I see?"

"Somethin' awful, I shu'd think."

"Not so orful ez et was strange. Thar was devils in that 'ar cavern."

"Devils!"

"Jest so. I seen 'em."

"An' what was they doin'? Come, yer has fired me cl'ar up wi' citement."

"I'll tell yer what they was doin'. They had big lights thar, an' a big masheen o' some sort, an' they was grindin' an' punchin' like mad."

"An' they diskivered you right thar, hey?"

"Not much! An' I'm glad they didn't, too, fer I don't reckon they'd 'a' let me go ef they had."

"Then how did they know ye had been thar?"

"I'm comin' ter that now. I got skart a-lookin' at 'em, an' I made up my mind ter git out o' that jest ez soon as I could. So, down ther ledge I crawled, mighty keerful, till I was 'most to ther bottom, an' thar I stopped short."

"What wur et!"

"Et war armed men on guard, that's what. My ba'r jest riz on eend. Thar I was, an' thar was them; an' I was in a fix."

"I shu'd think so!"

"But I waited, an' purty soon they moved off a leetle, an' then down I got an' jest scooted fer all I was worth."

"An' they didn't see ye?"

"Nixey."

"Then how did they git onto et?"

"I ain't done wi' me story yet. I'll show yer now. I run'd till I was out o' sight o' ther cavern, an' then I jest walked Spanish fer home fer all I was wu'th."

"An' they heard ye, an' foller'd."

"No, no. Jest let me tell et, ef yer will."

"All right, but hurry."

"Waal, I was pacin' et off lively, when all of a sudden a rifle was popped under me nose, an' a feller tells me ter up wi' me hands or he'd plump plumbeum inter me vitals. I put 'em up."

"I shu'd think so."

"And then he wanted ter know whar I'd been, an' I tell ye I had ter lie like sin ter git out of et. An' he didn't let me go, nuther, till another chap had come au' sounded me. But I fooled 'em, an' they let me off."

"An' that's all thar is to et, hey?"

"That's all; an' I opine that 'ar coffin was a

reminder that I mustn't be ketched thar no more."

"Very likely. And I don't believe you ever will be, hey?"

"Nary a onceet, you bet!"

"Waal, I'm much 'bleeged to ye fer postin' me. I'll know ernaly ter stay away from Mister Fiddler's domain, you kin jest gamble. But, that's yer poet pard a-lookin' fer ye, I reckon."

Ferguson Finn had entered again, and was looking around.

His eyes soon fell upon the bummer, and he advanced to where he and Dick were seated.

"Here you are, eh?" he greeted. "I don't want to interrupt a pleasant chat, but would like to talk with you when you are at liberty."

"Yer kin set right down hyar an' talk all yer wants ter," Tecumseh invited. "This hyar is Mister Tablet, what has rented my shanty, an' he ar' one of ther best fellers yer ever met."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Tablet," the poet greeted, extending his hand. "My name is Ferguson Finn, and I'm a poet by birth. It does me pleasure to make your acquaintance, I assure."

"Reckon we is mutually tickled, then," responded Dick, grasping the proffered hand.

"I'm allus glad ter make new 'quaintances."

"An' Mister Tablet ar' a he-hoss, you bet!" cried Tecumseh. "He licked ther wu'st man in ther camp jest afore you kem."

"Ha! I heard something about that outside there. So, you are the gentleman, eh?"

"Oh, that was nothin'," Dick easily passed over.

"Nothing! Sir, I saw the man you whipped, and he looked big enough for two of you."

"It was only chance that helped me out of et."

"I know better," Tecumseh declared, flatly. "Yer has ther stregh of a big giant, Mister Tablet, an' I'd back ye 'g'inst any odds."

"An' lose yer money. Et was only luck, I tells ye."

"It was bad luck for your opponent, anyhow, by the way he looked," the poet remarked.

Dick had been studying the man again, and was more than ever impressed that he was other than he seemed.

In fact he was now sure of it.

And he had noticed, too, that the man was eying him with the keenest scrutiny whenever their eyes met.

Dick felt sure the man was no stranger to him.

They talked on for some time, about nothing in particular, and the poet took his leave.

"What do you know about that man?" Dick then asked of Tecumseh.

"No more'n you do," the answer.

"He seems to have taken a fancy to you, anyhow."

"Yas; but I don't see why he should, now that yer speaks 'bout et."

"I would look out fer him, ef I was you," Dick cautioned. "He don't please my eye over much."

"What do yer think ar' wrong with him?"

"Oh, I don't know, pard; I may be wrong ter jedge him. But I wouldn't tell him this hyar what yer has jest been tellin' me."

"No, I reckon I won't."

"But, yer didn't finish that, did yer?"

"Yas, I guess so."

"Did yer go back ter look fer ther place ergain?"

"That's so, I didn't tell ye 'bout that part of it. I went back thar in ther daytime, when I knowed ther way was open ter all, an' I looked fer that 'ar cavern."

"An' what was et like by daylight?"

"Et wasn't like nothin', fer I didn't find et er tall."

"Yer didn't find et!"

"Nary. Et was clean gone."

"Yer must 'a' struck ther wrong place."

"No I didn't, nuther! I know ther place was all right, but ther cavern war gone as slick as a whistle."

"I can't understand that."

"No, ner me, nuther; but at ar' ther fact jest ther same."

"An' wasn't nobody thar ter drive ye off?"

—"Nary a soul, fer Jim Fiddler's ground is all open by daytime."

"But et was after that that ther coffin kem to yer shanty, of course."

"Yas."

"That tells ther story, then. Somebody seen ye prowlin' around thar, an' so they've gev ye warnin' not to come ergain. Ef I was you I wouldn't go 'thin a mile of ther place fer a hundred dollars."

And Tecumseh was of the same mind. Their confab lasted a little longer, when Dick took leave of the man he had so artfully pumped.

CHAPTER XIII.

DICK GETS AT THE SECRET.

DICK returned to the shanty.

There supper was awaiting him, and all enjoyed the simple repast.

As the doors were open, all took care to keep up the assumed characters, and so forestall chance detection.

The coffin had been taken out, and now leaned idly against the side of the shanty, awaiting a call for its peculiar sort of usefulness, apparently.

The meal finished, Dick and Kate held a consultation in private.

That over, Dick attended to the needs of their mules, still tethered behind the shanty, and then sauntered away up the valley.

It was daylight yet, in fact the sun was not out of sight, but another hour would find darkness drawing on, and the moon would not rise early.

When he had gone some distance, he sat down on a boulder, watching toward the direction of the camp he had left.

"I guess it's all right," he mused. "I don't believe any one saw me strike out in this direction. If any one did he is not paying any further attention to me."

By stooping a little, he could gain the cover of some rocks without chance of being seen again from the direction of the camp, and doing that, proceeded, and was soon in the gulch.

It was the way by which he had come into the camp on the previous night, and consequently the way led to Jim Fiddler's ground.

He made haste to get within the forbidden territory.

Finally he came to the point where the guardsman had been posted, which he instantly recognized.

Beyond that point he proceeded with more caution.

Taking from his pocket the pictures his noble little life "pard" had taken on the sly during their passage through the forbidden ground, he looked at them.

And from them he looked at the scenery along the way, until presently an exclamation escaped him.

"Ha! this is one of the spots!" he muttered. "I am in the right direction, anyhow. Now, two more, and then the cavern."

He pressed on, but presently came to a fork, where he paused in doubt which way to go.

Looking again at the pictures, however, he found that one of them represented that very scene, but taken from the opposite direction, of course, and that guided him.

"Now," he said to himself, "one more, and then I shall have to use all caution as I approach the home-base of the rascally crew. They may dose me with lead on sight, if they discover me."

He pressed forward, looking for the original scenery of the next picture, and ere long discovered it.

The next in order called for the scene at the lighted cavern.

This picture he studied well, as he knew he should have to, since Tecumseh had declared that the cavern had a way of disappearing.

The picture represented a rugged scene, well up from the trail, with the lighted cavern in the center. Above and around it was a wild mass of rock that looked like all such places.

Near the bottom of the picture were caught the tops of some mountain pines, behind which seemed to be a jutting ledge.

As he studied it, the rock wall just above these tree-tops seemed to assume the form of a rude cross.

He studied it well.

Yes, there it was, big and rude, but a form that could not be mistaken when seen again.

"The cross will guide me," he, nursed as he now put the pictures away. "I'll look for that, since I mustn't expect to find the picture repeated in the original."

His progress now was with all caution.

Stooping under the rocky ledge, he went along in a bent position for a time, till he came to a place where less shelter was afforded.

Here he lay down and crept along, determined not to be seen if care would be of any advantage toward guarding against it.

Later on the nature of the trail permitted him to walk again, and with a weapon in hand he pressed on.

Suddenly he halted, as he rounded an abrupt bend.

Just ahead, on the right, were some stunted pines such as he had been looking out for.

He examined the rock above them with critical eye, but there was no outline of rude cross, and certainly no cavern entrance.

As the picture had been taken coming from the opposite direction, however, he knew that he must pass the trees in order to catch the right view of the original in order to recognize it.

But here it was a hazardous proceeding.

There was but one safe way, and that was to repeat the creeping process.

The sun was now set, and the shadows were deepening rapidly, which was in his favor, but no time was to be lost.

Keeping close to the side from which he looked for discovery if it came at all, he crept forward with the silence of a cat, and at last had passed the trees.

Then to venture a look in the direction he had come was the next thing to be done.

To step out into the trail would be to invite detection, yet where he was he could not get the view he desired.

Just a little further on was a growth of bushes, however, that promised the protection he needed, so he crept forward till he had gained that.

Here he rose up, and peering cautiously over the top of the bushes, took a long and critical survey of the scene before him. It was unsatisfactory at first, but there were things to consider.

The picture had been taken by moonlight, with the moon slanting from an easterly direction. Now it was scant daylight, with the light falling upon the rocky wall from the west. He could not expect to find the light and shade the same.

Taking the picture from his pocket he studied it well.

The outline of the cross was not to be seen now, but the tops of the trees were identical with those in the picture, and point by point he made out the rocks to be the same in spite of the difference in the shadows.

"It is the spot," he finally decided, "and near the top of that middle pine is the opening to the cavern. But where is it now?"

There was certainly nothing of the kind there now, nor did it appear as though there ever had been.

Without the aid of the picture he would hardly have been able to find the place, even had he seen it before, which he had not.

"That is the spot," he fully decided, "and what I do has got to be done in a hurry. There's no time for fooling, for the men will soon be astir, I have no doubt."

The middle tree of the group of pines was the tallest of the lot, and marking that well with his eyes, Dick dropped down and crept back again toward it.

Reaching its shade, he had to climb up the rocks a little way to reach the trunk, but he did not hesitate, and soon had the satisfaction of laying his hand on it.

A moment's pause, then, and he began to climb.

His plan was now easily understood. He would climb the tree and watch from its top.

With due caution, and as much silence as possible, he made his way up through the ragged and scraggy branches, until finally he could see above the other trees.

Here he stopped, deciding that it was as far as he ought to go.

Here, while he could overlook the tops of the other trees, their foliage was a screen for his body, and he could see everything that took place on the narrow plateau.

A plateau he had discovered the ledge to be, but in looking for the opening to the cavern, he was baffled.

No such opening was to be found, nor any signs of a place that was likely to prove the hiding of such opening. Dick was puzzled.

There was nothing to be done but to wait, so he made himself as comfortable as possible.

A considerable time passed, and the darkness all around was intense.

The first warning sound to reach the ears of the watcher, was the sound of voices on the plateau.

Nothing could be seen, there was no light, and he could not distinguish any words; but there were evidently several men there.

This lasted for a considerable time longer, till at last steps were heard on the trail below.

Following that, movements were heard on the narrow plateau, and presently a light flashed forth in the darkness.

It proved to be a torch in the hands of a man, and by its light Dick could see clearly the features of the other men standing around.

They were nearly all men whom he had seen at Last Chance, and to recognize them again would be a matter of course. They were his prey from that moment, if he should want them.

Another torch or two soon added to the light, and by the light the men in the gulch began to make their way up the rugged trail that lay partly under the shadow of the pines.

Dick was looking down to get sight of these, and presently found that there were about half a dozen of them.

Altogether there were about a dozen or fifteen men of the mysterious company.

When next he glanced up to the plateau a surprise awaited his wondering eyes, for there right before him was a broad, dark opening in the rocks.

How it had come there he could not discover. Certainly no sound had been made that was loud enough to draw his attention, and he was at loss to account for the manner of the mystery.

There it was though, and there was no denying that part of it.

When the men from below had gained the plateau, and Dick caught sight of their faces, he gave a start of surprise.

One was the portly Mr. Sturgiss who had come in by the stage that afternoon, and another was Mr. Ferguson Finn, the seedy-looking self-styled poet.

"Ha!" exclaimed Dick, in mind, "this is your lay, is it? I'll be able to get at you yet, my lauky friend, if I give you rope enough."

"Are the men on guard all right?" he now heard asked.

"Yas, they is all right," a response was spoken.

"Good enough. Light up, then, and we'll get at work. A little longer here and we'll strike out for other quarters."

"Yas," spoke the other voice, "fer et ar' gettin' too warm hyar. Thar are too much curiosities bein' roused about Jim Fiddler. Better he'd never been heard of."

One of the torch-bearers had entered the cavern, and soon a blaze of light shone forth from within, revealing to the watcher in the tree the whole secret of the den at a glance.

The story of Jim Fiddler was merely a myth, as he now knew, and this was the reason the place was so jealously guarded. With eager eyes he watched the proceedings of the next hour and then fully satisfied, descended the tree to make his way back to the camp.

CHAPTER XIV.

A WARNING DULY PUNCHED.

"THE next thing is something else," Dick mused, when he had gained the lower trail once more.

There, as he had discovered, were two men on guard, about as Tecumseh had described, and to try to pass them would mean a fight.

He decided that he would have to wait, trusting to them to move away and give him the opportunity he wanted. And as it happened he did not have to wait long.

The men presently came together under the tree behind which he was hiding, and after a few minutes talk, parted and went off in opposite directions, leaving the immediate coast all clear.

Dick came forth with caution, and dropping to hands and knees, crept away in the direction he had come.

By this time he knew something about these guardsmen and their beats. These two were, so to say, the inner guard.

Their sections were short, and in the vicinity of the home base.

So Dick knew they would not go far ere they started to return, and that he must find another hiding-place or prepare to fight his way through the line.

He remembered a little further ahead a place where there was a natural shelf of rock overhanging the ground, which he had noticed in coming in, and meant to gain that point if he could.

He had no more time than he wanted, as he found.

As he drew near to the cleft he heard the steps of the guardsman on his return.

He had barely reached the place and rolled in under the rock when the man came along, passing by without a suspicion of the nearness of a foe.

When he had gone Dick rolled out again, and now, springing to his feet, made all the haste he could with silence to get away from so dangerous a locality. He knew that his life would be of little value if he was discovered.

But he was not out of the woods yet.

The outer guard had to be passed, for he was now undoubtedly on his post.

As Dick approached the place where he expected to find him, he used more caution, and presently discovered his man.

The moon was just rising, and outlined against its magnified disk at a distance down the gulch was the guardsman, leaning on his rifle and wide awake and on the alert.

Here the redoubtable Richard looked for trouble.

He did not see how he was going to pass that point without discovery, and yet that was what he wanted to do.

Not that he feared the man, for he could get the "drop" on him and pick him off if necessary, but that was not what he wanted to do.

Dick did not shed blood where it was to be avoided, and all he cared for was to get out of Jim Fiddler's ground without allowing any one to know he had been there at all.

Using every precaution, Dick advanced, keeping well in the shadows, and presently was within a few yards of the guardsman.

Here he was behind a shoulder of rock, and knew that it would be impossible for him to go any further without discovery, for the way was now open and light.

While he was studying the situation, trying to think of some plan for drawing the man away from his post, the guardsman got down from the point of rock upon which he had been standing.

For a moment Dick lost sight of him, but presently saw him coming toward the point where he stood.

Dick drew a weapon, and stood on the defensive.

If discovered, he meant to be the first to get in a shot.

As he waited, however, he heard steps coming from the opposite direction as well.

He was in the shadow where he stood, and now drew back as far as possible and found that he was not likely to be seen without search.

As the persons came on they and the guardsman were destined to meet at or near the point where Dick was.

Two men were now in sight, coming on at a rapid walk, and just as they reached the point where Dick was in hiding the guardsman stopped them.

"Hold up hyar!" Dick heard him sing out.

And he recognized the voice as that of Mr. Dominick Draper.

He had seen this man at the camp since he had come there, and knew him for a jovial rascal.

"We're going out, not in," one of the men responded.

And these Dick had recognized as Alban Sturgis and Ferguson Finn, the moon shining full upon them as they passed.

"Can't help what way ye're goin'," declared the guardsman, "if yer don't want a plug of ther pleb'ian plumbum jest elevate yer flaps, that's all."

The men laughed.

"Well, up they are, then," said one.

"That's ther desired style; an' now jest deliver ther pass."

"Legal tender."

"Good enough; yer kin pass. Yer see no galoot ar' goin' ter git by hyar what ain't all right."

"That's the way to do it, and the only way," complimented Sturgiss. "Bring the next man to a halt in the same way."

"Yer kin bet I will."

The two men passed on, and after standing there by the rocky projection for a few moments the guard returned to his post.

Dick's plan was now formed.

He intended to use the password he had just heard.

Taking off his false beard, he waited a few minutes longer and then set off up the gulch at a rapid walk.

In a brief time he was at the point where the sentinel was stationed, and the usual challenge was made.

"Ho' up!" was the cry, in brief abbreviation.

Dick stopped promptly and put up his hands, at the same time saying hurriedly:

"Legal tender, pard. I'm in a rush ter ketch ther two that went out a few minutes ago."

"All right, scoot erlong with yer, then."

And so he was allowed to go, and in due time was in the camp once more and at the rear door of the shanty.

It was opened by Kate, when he had given their understood signal, and he passed in.

"Well, what luck?" Kate asked.

"Good!" answered Dick. "Your pictures did the business."

"Then you found the place?"

"Yes; and got at the bottom of the mystery, too."

"What was it?"

"Counterfeiting; just what we suspected from the first."

"I'm glad you had such success, Dick, and that you are back again all right, for I have been worried about you."

"Why so, little one? You know I have the lives of a cat."

"And cats have only one, the best of them."

"But what made you so anxious?"

"Something has happened here."

"And what was it?"

"I'll tell you: We were startled just after dark by hearing several pistol-shots, all in a volley, and the more startled to hear the bullets come thudding into the side of the shanty here."

"The deuce!"

"Wait till you hear all. It was over in one second's time, and we heard no more, and after a good long wait I ventured out to look around. Nothing was to be seen in the direction from which the bullets had come. I next looked for the place where they had struck."

"Well?"

"I found that they had been fired at the coffin, from a distance of fifty yards or so, and nearly all had hit it. There had been six or eight of the shots, as I guessed when I heard them. In the coffin, as I looked, I discovered another piece of paper about like the one you found there first, but the writing on it was something entirely different."

"This gets interesting, pet. What was it?"

"Here it is, Dick."

She took as she spoke a folded paper from her pocket and put it into Dick's hand.

Two or three holes were noticeable on it, the work of the bullets had been hurled into the coffin, and opening it Dick read:

PRIVATE WARNING.

"Deadwood Dick it won't work. Your little game is up. Get out in less than twenty-four hours, or you will have such holes as these in your body. We mean bus'ness straight. If you have good sense you will heed this warning."

COMMITTEE OF COMPELUTION."

Dick's brows knit, and a fierce light shone in his eyes.

"How have they got onto us, Kate?" he questioned, reflectively.

"That is just what I would ask you, Dick," was the reply.

"And I give it up. No; hang me if I do, sither!"

"Then you have guessed it?"

"I believe I have. That pretended poet has something to do with it, I'm sure of that."

"Then you have fastened something upon him?"

"Saw him and Sturgiss both at the counterfeiter's den not an hour ago," Dick answered in whisper.

"Then it has been he."

"Yes; and I knew the fellow was more than he seemed. Well, they have given me twenty-four hours' grace, and I guess that will be time enough to scoop them."

Talking business, Dick and his little life-pard talked more as men would be likely to talk to each other.

They held quite a lengthy conference, and then together left the shanty, after first having told their *protegee*, Mrs. Makewell, something of their plans, and giving her warning against admitting any one.

It was not Dick's desire to have Kate accompany him into such rough haunts, but the little lady had a will of her own, and had declared that if she was his "pard" she must go with him through thick and thin; and that where danger was for him, that was the place for her to be.

He knew the sort of metal she was made of, and could trust her as far as she dared trust herself, and he had not yet seen the limit of her daring.

So, to the Never-Get-Left they went.

It was now getting on late in the evening, but excitement at the saloon was still going on.

As Dick entered he saw Alban Sturgiss and Fergusson Finn seated together at a table, talking over a glass of something of the double-strength sort.

They had their backs to the entrance, and Dick and Kate went over and dropped into seats immediately behind them.

The two were talking in low tones, but Dick's ears were keen, and by close attention he was able to overhear a good deal of what was being said. And he heard something of interest.

CHAPTER XV.

HARD-HITTER'S REVENGE.

"THEN what has got to be done?" Mr. Sturgiss had just asked.

Dick leaned back in his chair, in order to be the nearer to the "poet," and so catch his reply.

"One of two things," was the answer, and there was nothing very poetical in the matter-of-fact way in which it was spoken.

"And they are—"

"Either Deadwood Dick must be got rid of, or we must be out of this within the same limit of time ourselves."

"Nonsense! He is only one against twenty."

"And he's enough in himself to overbalance the whole twenty," was the response to that.

Mr. Sturgiss laughed.

"I tell you he is," Fergusson continued. "I guess I know something about him and what he can do. He's the man, and you can depend on it."

"But how are we going to prove it?"

"He has given the proof already, in the way in which he whipped that big fellow, as we have heard it told. I know of one man only who could have done that."

"Well, how to do away with him?"

"Somehow—anyhow. If he don't mosey out in the morning, then let's have a man pick him off on the sly."

"I hate to do that, but if it is that or the other, why I'll not hold back. I hope he will take the hint and draw out of the game without any fuss."

"But he won't; he isn't that sort."

"Then suppose we act upon your suggestion and get out ourselves."

"I have been thinking about that since I offered it. It won't work, for the men won't agree to it."

"We are boss of what they'll do and what they won't."

"Don't be so sure of that. But, even if they would, that devil would only follow us up, now that he has scented us."

"Then you think he suspects?"

"I would bet a hundred dollars that's what he's here for."

"Well, I don't see how it can be; but if I thought it was so he wouldn't see the sun rise."

At that interesting point Tecumseh, the bummer, came along and interrupted the talk.

"A frog!—he would!—a wool!—ing go!"

So he was humming, but he stopped short at sight of his new comrade, the poet, exclaiming:

"Bless my eyes, but here ye are at last! I have been lookin' all over fer ye, an' thort ye had picked up an' got out o' camp."

"Oh, no; I'm here yet," was the impatient response.

"But, whar hev ye been?"

"Why, I have fallen in with Mr. Sturgiss, here, and through a little favor I was able to show him he has taken me in to lodge with him."

"Oh-ho! Then et looks ez ef ye wouldn't have no need of my humble quarters under ther saloon byar."

Tecumseh was bound to let the arrangement out in full.

"Well, no, I rather think not, now. You see, I am a child of the gods, and fortune is bound to smile on me."

"Then I only wish I was a child of ther gods meself, about now, fer this is ther time o' night that I'm ther dryest. Sorry ter lose ye as a bed-feller, but glad of yer good luck jest ther same."

"Don't mention it, don't mention it at all," the poet waived.

"And here, my good fellow," added Sturgiss, "here is a dollar. Go and fill yourself up full with it."

He leaned back as he said this, to extend his arm behind Fergusson to reach the bummer, and as he did so he caught sight of who was behind his companion.

Dick happened to have his eye on him at the same moment, in a sly way, and he noted that he grew deadly pale for just a moment.

"Thanks, noble sir, thanks!" cried the bummer, taking the money greedily. "What can I do in return for sech noble deeds! Say the word, an' I'll sing forty or fifty verses of—"

"Heaven forbid!" gasped Sturgiss. "Take it and go, that is all."

Tecumseh uttered more thanks, but finally bowed and scraped himself away, and Fergusson turned again to Sturgiss.

"That would be the best thing to do anyhow," he resumed. "and—"

But he stopped short at a sign from the other.

"Say, I'm tired of the noise of this den," he spoke. "Let's get out of it and finish our talk elsewhere."

That ended all, and Fergusson, looking about to learn the cause of the interruption, saw Adam Tablet and his young brother just behind them, engaged in earnest conversation.

The pair passed out of the saloon.

"What do you think of all that, Dick?" asked Kate, in a whisper.

"I think there is going to be a little circus here before we are much older, that's what I think," was the grim response.

"And you think we'll be in it?"

"Right in the ring, Kate."

"I have been thinking it all over, Dick, and I have come to the conclusion that the sooner we wind this up, the better."

"My thought exactly, little one. I have an idea that this very night is the time for us to seize the den."

"I am glad that our thoughts run in the same direction so often."

"And I'm glad that I've got a 'pard' who can take such a hold of matters as you do. You are my second self, Kate. No wonder they dubbed us the tandem team, eh?"

After some further exchange of remarks, they left the saloon and returned to the shanty.

There Dick left Kate for a time, and went to find Mansen Gilberts.

He was at the hotel, and as Dick had laid off his disguise, he was of course unknown when he went in.

Stepping up to the mine-manager, he asked if his name was Gilberts, and being told that it was, said he wanted a few minutes' talk in private.

The manager followed him to the piazza.

"Well, who are you?" he questioned. "What do you want?"

"I'm Deadwood Dick," was the answer. "I've got at the bottom of that matter, and the time is ripe to strike."

"The deuce! Why, you haven't had time to do it, man!"

"I've got there all the same," assured Dick.

"And what's to be done?"

"Get out our men, very quietly, and go and take the rascals."

With that he made a hurried explanation of it all, awaking the keenest interest.

"I'll have the men ready in twenty minutes," he promised.

"There's one precaution to take," Dick mentioned.

"And what's that?"

"We must wait till this man Sturgiss and his tool are in for the night."

"Why not take them now?"

"I have something further to do with them to-morrow."

"Hal then you have other fishes in the pan besides these we are frying now!"

"Rather the same ones to be cooked twice, Mr. Gilberts. Now, you get your men and have them armed, and let them assemble at the head of the valley one by one, so as not to attract attention, and I will meet you there in say half an hour."

"All right."

"I will play the sly upon Sturgiss and his man for a time, till I am sure of their remaining in, and then we'll be off."

"Very well, I understand. I will be there."

"We will make a job of it. We will strike a deathblow to this sort of business here."

So they parted, Mr. Gilberts going off in one direction while Dick set out in the other, aiming for the cabin occupied by Sturgiss.

Passing around it, he came up to the shadowed side, and there, through a chink in the wall, he could see the light from within.

Approaching and applying his eye, he discovered that the men were preparing for bed.

"They are safe enough, unless something alarms them or they are called out," he mused.

"and I'll take my chances of all that."

From there he went direct to his own shanty.

And it was here that a startling surprise awaited him.

On coming to the door, he was surprised and startled to find that it had been split and nearly forced from the hinges.

The door was open, of course, and there was no light within.

Weapons in hand, Dick cleared the sill at a bound and called to his little "pard."

A moan from one side of the room was the answer.

"Heavens! what has happened?" Dick gasped.

With all haste he struck a match, and as soon as it blazed up he made a discovery.

There on the floor lay Mrs. Makewell, bound and gagged, and her little daughter beside her in the same predicament.

Lighting the lamp, Dick took a hasty look into the outer room, only to find that Kate was gone.

"My God!" he gasped, "what can it mean?"

Hastily putting down the lamp, he freed Mrs. Makewell.

"What has happened?" he demanded.

"Where is Kate? Tell me, quick."

"She has been carried off!" was the gasped cry.

"By whom?"

"A big, terrible-looking man, with his eyes all black and blue. He broke in the door before we had heard a sound, and was upon us before we could do a thing."

"Why didn't Kate kill him at the instant?"

"She was near the door, and when he broke it open she was knocked down."

"Poor Kate! But, tell me, do you know which way she was taken? I must be after her this minute."

"The brute said he would take her to a place where she would be legal tender, as he called it, whatever it meant. That is all I know."

Dick knew in a moment where to search for her.

"How long has she been gone?"

"Not more than fifteen minutes, sir, at most."

"Then I'll have him. Can you render me some help, think you?"

"I can, and will. Only direct me what to do."

In all haste, then, Dick told her of the plan to attack the rascals at the cavern, and desired her to meet Mr. Gilberts at the head of the valley and tell him of what had happened, and that he, Dick, had gone on to the rescue of his wife. And, it understood, Dick set out in haste.

CHAPTER XVI.

DICK DEALS THE DEATHBLOW.

DICK entered the gulch at a run. His wife was in the hands of merciless ruffians!

And at a run he continued until he was brought to a stop by the challenge of the guardian of the way.

Dick had removed his disguise, as we have seen, so appeared now the same as when he had gone out some time before, as narrated.

The challenge was the same as before, and as forcible.

"Yer seems ter be in a hurry," Mr. Dominick Draper remarked.

"You bet I am," answered Dick, "an' wi' good reason, too. Did he git her in all safe?"

"Git who in? What yer talkin' 'bout?"

"Why, Hard-hitter, of course. Didn't he go in with ther young feller?"

"I sees yer knows all about et. Yes; he went in, an' had ther young feller across his back."

"Good fer him! I'm after him, then. Reckon ye want ther pass?"

"Them's what ther orders is."

"Legal tender."

"All right, go ahead."

The fellow had lowered his rifle, and Dick started on, but of a sudden, and with the quickness of lightning, he wheeled about and covered the man with his revolvers, exclaiming:

"Hands up, or you drop!"

The fellow was too surprised to know what to do."

"Up with them!" Dick repeated, fiercely, "or you die in your tracks!"

There was nothing to do but obey, and that the fellow did, letting his rifle drop.

The next moment Dick was upon him and handcuffs were upon his wrists.

It was but the work of a minute, then, to gag him effectually, and laying him at one side of the trail, Dick sped on.

At the next guardsman's post he was challenged again, but giving the pass as he ran, he was bounding up the rugged way to the den before the guardsman could tell whether it was right or wrong.

Dick was now on dangerous ground. His life was worth little here. But, his wife was in the hands of these villains, and what cared he for the danger.

Thrusting his weapons out of sight, he entered boldly into the lighted front of the cavern.

The scene that met his gaze was one that made him more a demon than the cool, calm detective he really was.

There, in the midst of a circle of ruffians, was his wife, in the power of Hard-hitter Jeems, who had just made the discovery of her true character.

Some coarse jest was just passing the fellow's lips when Dick sprung into the circle, struck him a blow on the neck that felled him like an ox, and in the same instant Dick's weapons were in hand.

Kate had uttered a glad cry, and her hands not being bound, drew her own revolvers with lightning promptness.

"Hands up!" thundered Dick.

Two or three obeyed, but the others reached for weapons.

It was no time for dallying, and Dick's weapons spoke quick, sharp and fiercely.

Every bullet found its mark, too, and in less than half as many seconds, six of the fellows were dead on the floor—rather, dying.

As for Hard-hitter, he had not stirred after his fall, nor did he ever stir again. His neck had been broken. It had been a deathblow for him indeed.

"Hands up!" Dick cried again, as there was a second's pause, and every hand went up.

"Thank God!" whispered Kate, fervently.

"Keep them covered," said Dick, quickly, "and drop the first one who makes a move to lower his hand. You can shoot as well as I can myself. More are coming."

Leaving Kate to attend to that important matter, which he knew she was fully capable of doing, Dick sprung to the entrance.

He was just in time, for the two guardsmen from below were just coming.

"Hands up!" Dick ordered, promptly.

One obeyed, but the other made the attempt to lift his rifle to his shoulder.

A bullet from Dick's weapon dropped him in the same moment, and the other stood pale and trembling.

Driving this man before him, Dick returned to where Kate was standing, and they proceeded to bind the prisoners with rope they found there, and in a short time they were made secure.

"There, curse you! how do you like that?" Dick cried.

"Who in the dickins are you?" one demanded.

"I'm called Deadwood Dick," was the response.

A murmur of excited comment ran through the group.

Dick had caught his wife to his arms, and pressed a kiss upon her lips.

"How brave you were, to come so promptly to my rescue, and all alone!" Kate complimented.

"Brave!" echoed Dick. "I was desperate. I would face the legions of hell itself, under such circumstances, Kate."

"I believe you would."

They talked for a moment longer, and after that Dick made an examination of the den.

He discovered here the counterfeit money that had been causing somewhat of trouble in many of the banks recently.

The entrance to the cavern, as he found, was covered by a painted canvas, in the daytime appearing so like the rock itself that no one from the trail below could detect the difference.

Knowing that Mr. Gilberts and his men would soon appear, Dick did nothing further until his arrival.

Dick hailed him from above as soon as he appeared, and directed him how to ascend to the ledge, and when he had gained the top, his surprise can be imagined.

"You didn't tackle them alone?" he gasped.

"As you see, sir," answered Dick. "I would do it again, too, under like conditions, even were they twice as many."

They had a long talk, then, as to how to proceed with the rest of the matter, and finally it was arranged to leave the prisoners there in the keeping of Mr. Gilberts's men until a certain hour in the morning, when they were to be marched into Last Chance. Some would remain to guard the den.

That fixed, Dick and Kate, with Mr. Gilberts and one or two more, returned to the camp.

Next morning at an early hour Dick was a caller at the cabin of Mr. Sturgiss and his evil consorts.

With him were Mr. Gilberts, two or three men, and Mrs. Makewell and her little daughter. The door was opened by Sturgiss.

Dick's greeting was an order for him to raise his hands, and under the press of necessity it was obeyed. The other two did the same, as weapons covered them all.

"What do you mean by this outrage, sir?" Sturgiss demanded, putting on a blustering front.

"It means that you are my prisoner, charged with being the chief of the band of counterfeiters I arrested last night," was the cool reply.

The rascal fell back as though struck dumb, his face like death. He might have asked resistance, but it was too late now, for hands were upon them and they were helpless.

"I ain't in it, anyhow," declared the flashy young woman.

"If you are not now, you will be," promised Dick. "I take it you have done a big share at passing the bogus money."

She paled, and he knew he had hit the nail on the head.

"But who is this woman?" demanded Sturgiss, as Mrs. Makewell had forced herself in front of him.

"Look and see, Alban Sturgiss Makewell!" the woman cried.

With the words she snatched off her disguise, and he recognized her at once.

"You!" he gasped.

"Yes, I," was the response.

"And what do you want? What has brought you here?"

"I want the rights belonging to this child," the woman demanded, sternly. "I have here a paper that must have your signature."

"And you had better sign it, I warn you, ordered Dick. "Here are witnesses enough for the occasion, and witnesses whose names will have weight enough to bolster up yours."

Mrs. Makewell had produced the paper, and held it out for the man to look and read if he would.

"I see it is all up, curse you!" he grated, hatefully, "and I'll sign it on one condition."

"What is that?" asked the woman.

"That I am allowed to go free."

She laughed at him.

"I can answer that for you," spoke up Deadwood Dick.

The woman stepped forward and said something in a low tone. Instantly the man's face took on a look of abject terror, and he gasped:

"Yes, I'll sign, freely and willingly, if you will only keep that secret."

"Then we'll have you sign," she said, coldly. "I will give my word to keep that, since you are likely to be punished enough as it is."

Whatever the secret was, it was something that carried her out in her demand, and the signature was put to the paper, the witnesses attesting it.

"Now," said Dick, "we will take you out and let you see your band brought into town prisoners. We have got them, every one, except those who are dead, and I guess we have got them, too."

About that time a shout was heard without, and they knew the prisoners were being brought in.

Dick and Kate led their new prisoners out, and when the others came up, put them at the head of the line, and so marched them to the space in front of the hotel and saloon.

There Dick addressed the crowd, telling all about the case, but as it is now well known to the reader, it is not necessary to give it here. Besides, lack of room forbids the attempt. Let the imagination picture it as it was.

The prisoners were taken care of, and a large crowd went back to the cavern to see the counterfeiters' den and to help Dick in the work of burying the dead. The stuff out of the cavern was brought to the camp, where Dick held possession of it till he could turn it over to the proper authorities.

Alban Sturgiss was the "Jim Fiddler" who had been playing such a peculiar role for so long a time. No one had ever seen Fiddler, so far as could be learned, and he was, in the fact of the case, a fictitious personage. Ferguson Finn turned out to be a rascally detective, one whom Dick had downed on another occasion, and who was in with Sturgiss in his present evil work.

It was the evil detective who had first guessed Dick's identity, and when all disguise was removed, Dick had no trouble in recognizing him. The Zenaide Pentree was a young woman of no character who had been used as a handy tool in passing the bad money. And the others, every one of them, had more or less crimes traced to their doors, and all eventually received the punishment they so richly deserved. They were taken away by the stage on its next trip.

Dick and his bride were heartily cheered, as the stage rolled away and they rode after it on their mules, and a hearty cheering greeted their final farewell. They had made a lasting impression there. And the last thing they heard was Tecumseh singing:

"A frog!—he would!—a wo!—ing go!
Whether!—his mother!—would let 'm!—or no!
Sing iddley!—diddley!—diddley!—doo!—de doo!
de doo!"

THE END.

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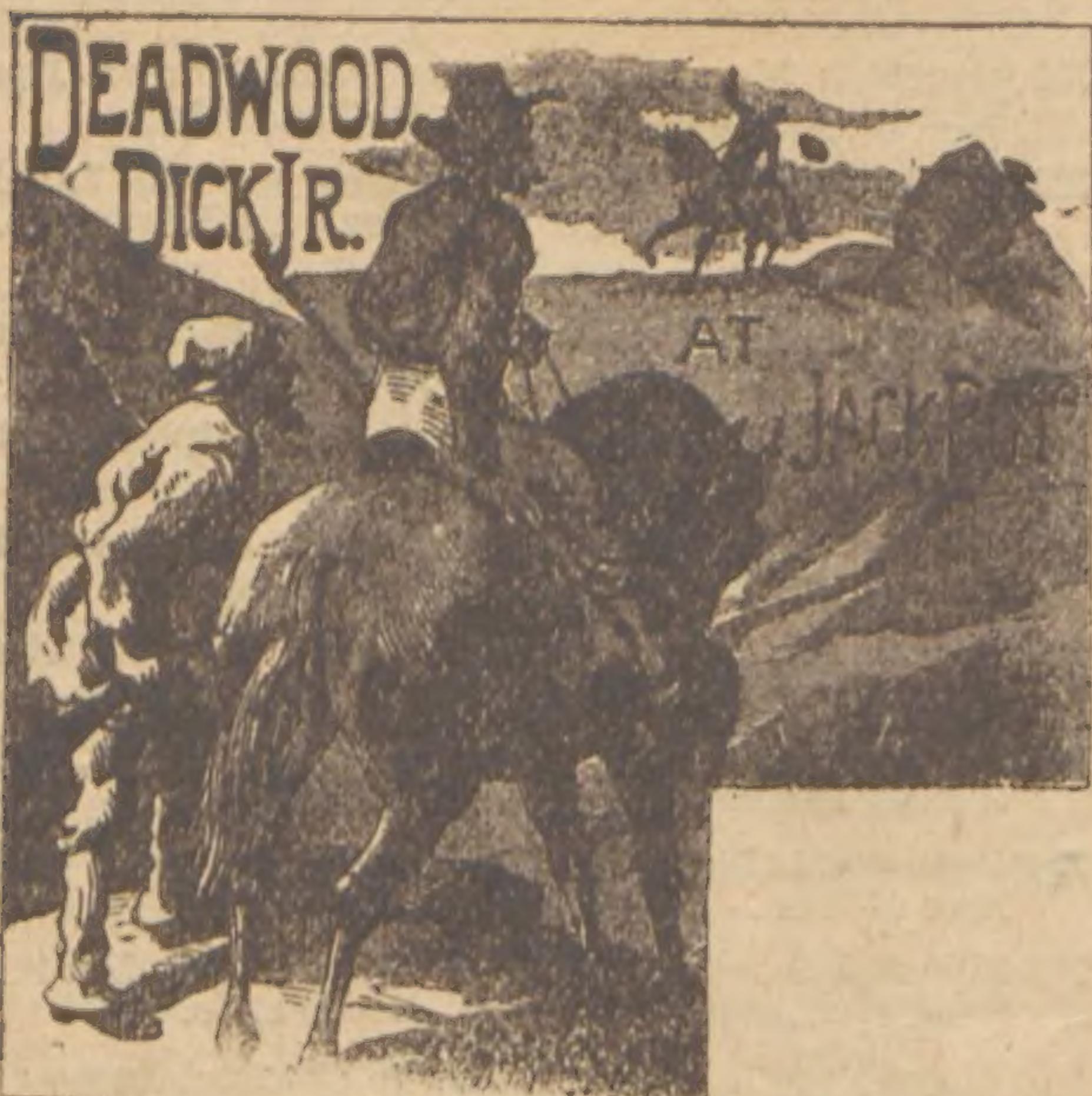
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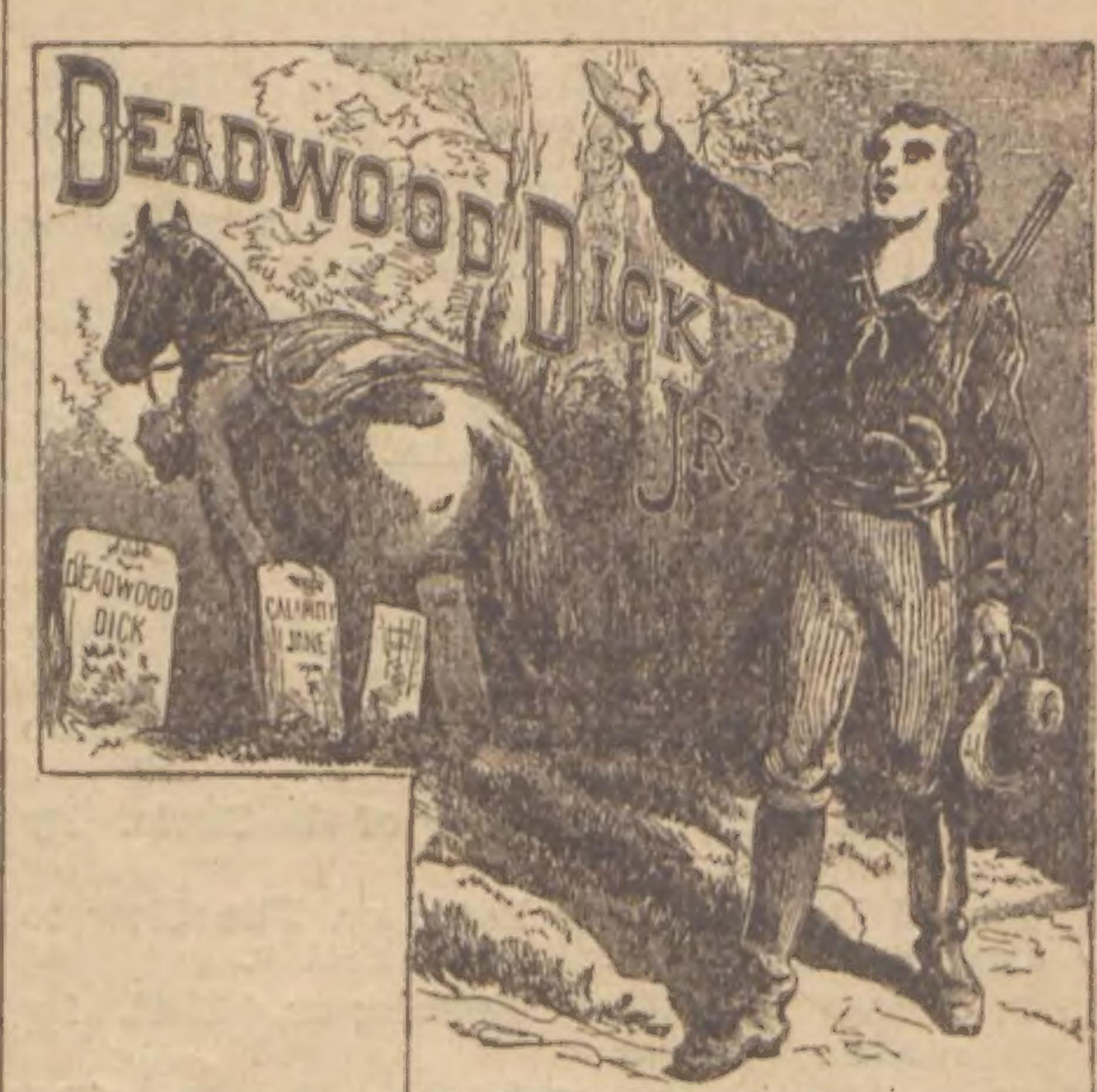


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